

### Gender role changes and their impacts on Syrian women refugees in Berlin in light of the Syrian crisis

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Habib, Nisren

**Working Paper**

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# WZB

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin  
für Sozialforschung



Nisren Habib

## **Gender Role Changes and their Impacts on Syrian Women Refugees in Berlin in Light of the Syrian Crisis**

**Discussion Paper**

SP VI 2018–101

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Nisren Habib

**Gender Role Changes and their Impacts on Syrian Women Refugees in Berlin in Light of the Syrian Crisis**

Discussion Paper SP VI 2018–101  
WZB Berlin Social Science Center (2018)

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Abstract

## **Gender Role Changes and their Impacts on Syrian Women Refugees in Berlin in Light of the Syrian Crisis**

by Nisren Habib\*

Gender roles of Syrian women started to shift in 2011, in light of the Syrian conflict. This shift was a response to the difficult situations which Syrian women faced inside Syria as well as in the neighboring countries to which they fled in the attempt to find safer living conditions. However, the uncertain situation and the precarious working and living conditions in Syria and the neighboring countries forced many Syrian women and families to flee to Europe, with the highest number to Germany, facing the challenge of a new culture and new social norms.

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate if and how the gender roles of Syrian women who fled to Berlin, Germany, have shifted. Using semi-structured interviews conducted in the period July – December 2016, the study illustrates the challenges and opportunities they face, both as women and as refugees, and in how far these affect their gender roles.

*Keywords: Gender roles changing, Refugees, Integration*

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## BACKGROUND

In order to have a better understanding of gender role changing of Syrian women<sup>1</sup> refugees to be discussed in this paper, I will briefly explain some of the most important factors that determine the legal and social status of females in Syria and will try to describe the political atmosphere with respect to women's participation. Also, I will consider the year 2011 as the main milestone of women's roles' shifting since there were no major changes with respect to the women's situation in Syria during the previous 3 decades whereas the year 2011 (with the Syrian uprising starting in March, 2011) can be considered a change point in the recent Syrian women's history. Huge changes in living conditions, demands, roles, ruling powers, and policies started to take place then and are still affecting the Syrian women's lives in light of the ongoing conflict in Syria.

### *Legal Frame of the Civil Status of Females in Syria*

I will start with some historical insights of the Syrian legal frame towards females; the situation of females in Syria was influenced by the ruling political power decisions since the Independence Day in 1947. The political and influential people were and still are responsible for establishing and implementing the main local laws which determine the civil status of the Syrian females, e.g. the Personal Status Law (PSL) or Family Law, the penal code and the constitution. I will give some examples of some articles which existed in these laws until this day in order to highlight to what degree the discrimination against Syrian females is legally implemented in the local laws in Syria.

The Syrian PSL applied today combines elements of Ottoman and French civil law, and Islamic law. The latter was included after the Constitution required that the Islamic jurisprudence is a major source of legislation. Laws related to females and family are handled by a separate independent religious court system [1]. This structure of the Syrian PSL contributes to legal inequalities not only between males and females but also between females of different religious affiliations [2].

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the term "Syrian women" encompasses any woman who resides or used to reside on the Syrian territory, regardless of her nationality.



However, having a mixed PSL does not mean that all laws that subject Syrian females are totally different according to the sect or to the religion. All Syrian females are subject to discrimination in most of the Syrians laws related to citizenship, custody, freedom of movement, and most basic rights; All Syrian women are not allowed to give their nationality to their children if married to non-Syrian men, whereas men have this right. Syrian woman cannot travel without their husband's approval, while men can. In addition, Syrian women of all ages are required to have male guardians to contract their marriages, while adult men are free to contract their own marriages. If an adult female marries without her guardian's consent, the guardian may invalidate her marriage.

All females again are subject to discrimination in the penal code, which allows any close male relative of a female to kill her in the name of "Honor Crime". Indeed, murders considered to have been in defense of honor are not considered a "crime", but an "offense" and are therefore punished with a penalty of imprisonment up to two years at maximum [3]. Before 2009, the penalty was even less (6 months to a year of imprisonment which could be reduced to one month by a judge [4]).

The Syrian constitution also emphasizes discrimination between women and men and even between Syrian men from different religions, since it declares in Article 3 of the last updated constitution in 2012, that the "Syrian president must be a Muslim man". And that "Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of Legislation" which eliminates the possibility of changing the legislations into civil ones [5].

These local laws towards Syrian women were reflected in the Syrian response form towards the international conventions related to women's rights: In 2003, Syria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but made several important reservations and has not yet ratified the Optional Protocol. Reservations to the convention were made to the following articles: Article 9(2), concerning the mother's right to pass on her nationality to her children; Article 15(4), regarding freedom of movement and choice of residence; Article 16(1), mandating equal rights and responsibilities during marriage and upon its dissolution with regard to guardianship, kinship,

maintenance, and adoption; Article 16(2), regarding the legal effect of the betrothal and marriage of a child; and Article 29(1), regarding arbitration between countries in the event of a dispute [6]. All these laws and regulations against Syrian women were implemented to become the general social norms inside the society and in daily life. They contribute to the inequality between women and men and give men legal power over women as reflected in different types of human rights violations against women. The religious communities and sects in Syria also play a major role in confirming these practices by adapting them whenever convenient or finding the religious pretext to keep them [7].

### *Syrian Women and Social Norms*

Social norms and customs have the largest influence on females' lives in the Syrian society: They govern the lives of the females and even their family members rather than the laws and sometimes rather than the religion. Many Syrians are not even familiar with the details of their rights and duties in domestic law. The social norms vary according to religion, ethnicity, and between rural and urban areas, but the general nature of these norms often put females in second place and consider them a source of honor or shame for the family.

Based on customs and traditions, the biggest oppression of females takes place in the family. In addition, females, especially girls, are exposed to social violence that results from discrimination between them and males. For instance, girls are expected to help their mother after school while boys may enjoy their spare time. By the same norms, married women are responsible for all domestic work even if both spouses are working the same hours.

Gender discrimination also shows up in access to education: Many girls are deprived of education and are married early, or preference is only given to their male siblings to continue their education. The decision to continue their education depends solely on the wishes of the parents, not on the wishes and needs of the children. Moreover, the Syrian society attributes to its female members many negative traits, and the positive ones to males: women are seen as weak and suppressed, while men are brave, generous, and hard-working.

Of course, it is not possible to generalize these examples to all Syrian families. The Syrian society is very diverse, and not all of its members adhere to traditional customs and norms. Many Syrian women enjoy independence and reject traditional social customs, especially if there is support from the family, at the expense of not being accepted by many groups in the Syrian society. Therefore, we cannot classify the entire Syrian society in one category, but there is a large group that conforms to traditional social norms.

### *Syrian Women Participation in Politics*

The constitutional and legal systems of Syria do not restrict equal political participation of women in parties, parliament, local administrations and government. However, the political authorities, male supremacy, customs, and traditions do not promote women's participation in politics in various ways. The most important obstacles to active political participation are:

1. Not promoting women's literacy, including political, professional and cultural literacy.
2. Dominance of patriarchal culture, overlapping with the values of political hegemony and male superiority, which emphasizes certain roles of the Syrian women, mostly reproductive and caring roles.
3. The general situation of disabling some of the main articles of the Constitution relating to civil and political rights and the law of association, which has a direct and multiplier effect on vulnerable groups, including women.
4. Lack of space for women's civil society organizations to establish and work, and the inability of these organizations to obtain legal and independent registration [\[8\]](#).

### *Gender Role Shifting of Syrian Women After 2011*

The Syrian uprising in 2011 was a turning point for the whole Syrian society, specifically for the Syrian women. During the first seven months in 2011 where the Syrian people tried to keep the uprising as peaceful as possible, women from different areas and religions organized and participated in peaceful demonstrations and provided vital humanitarian assistance to those in need.

Later, when this became a must, it was a noticeable shift in their role as women, in particular for women who used to be inside the house, but were now going out to take part in these protests and claim their people and their own rights. Syrian women also worked as first-aid nurses and were able to mingle with everyone and to play multiple roles at the same time. Like their male counterparts, Syrian women who took part in protests or provided aid, were targets of abuse, harassment, detention, and even torture by government forces [9].

Insecurity and discriminatory restrictions towards women increased when the peaceful era of the uprising ended, and violence increased dramatically in most Syrian areas. Indiscriminate and disproportionate attacks on civilians impacted women significantly, resulting in their increasing role as caretakers, primary wage-earners, and heads of households. As civilians faced increasingly desperate circumstances with ever more restricted supplies, and as men's presence and ability to fulfill their traditional roles dwindled, growing numbers of female-headed or female-supported households emerged. Families and communities were relying progressively more on women to procure and distribute humanitarian aid, care for the injured and disabled, and support families [10].

A contrary development took place in areas that got under the control of armed groups of extremists: Discriminatory restrictions were placed on women and girls, including strict dress codes, limitations on women's engagement in public life and ability to move freely, and constraints on their access to education and employment [11].

All these cruel circumstances forced thousands of Syrian women to flee from Syria, either alone or with their families, to Syrian neighboring countries, seeking safety, dignity and hope.

### *Syrian Women Refugees' Situation in the Neighboring Countries of Syria from a Gender Perspective*

In light of the ongoing conflict in Syria, a huge number of Syrian women had to be displaced internally from hot and unsafe zones into safer zones. After it became impossible to stay in Syria, they had to flee to one of the neighboring

countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq) or to Arab countries that allowed Syrians during the first two years of the conflict to enter their lands without a Visa (Egypt, Libya, Sudan, and others). Some refugees had to stay in camps while others were living in cities. They faced different problems and hard circumstances related to their legal status, work permits and job opportunities, education, medical care, and difficult psychological and social situations that shifted their roles and made them assume new roles. This was true regardless of the housing situation (camps and urban housing). Syrian women faced additional challenges since the prevalent socio-economic order and the lack of legal status increased women and girls' susceptibility to a range of human rights abuses and vulnerabilities whether in camps or urban housing. Forced and early marriages have reportedly risen compared to the pre-crisis period, as well as incidents of domestic violence, sexual and gender-based violence [12].

These new circumstances in the neighboring countries challenged to a certain degree the previously prevailing gender roles of Syrian women. Many researchers in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey studied the new reality of Syrian women and girls. Syrian women in Lebanon were still expected to fulfill their traditional roles but lost the resources they used to depend upon. They coped by prioritizing the needs of their husbands and children, often to the detriment of their own health and well-being. Living in overcrowded and poor accommodation centers increased the feelings of anxiety for men and women alike, as the lack of privacy undermined their own sense of dignity [13]. The situation was similar for Syrian women in Jordan where the gender dynamics changed especially for Syrian women living in the big camps in Jordan (Zaatari camp and Al Azraq camp): They were more involved in providing resources to the families, working outside the house (tent), and intervene in some important decisions. At the same time, women were still carrying out all expected or traditional roles that they previously used to exercise in Syria [14]. In Turkey, where 75% of the Syrian refugees were women and children, Syrian women faced similar bad conditions and overall stress, although Turkey had more equitable laws towards women compared to Lebanon and Jordan. However, the temporary legal status seemed to be the main reason for challenges and obstacles. In Turkey, women had the same right to work as men; however, Syrian women often found themselves engaging

in lower income-generating activities such as petty trading, seasonal agricultural work, and cleaning. The main challenges Syrian women were facing in relation to work and employment in Turkey were based on fears of harassment, lack of child day care, bad working conditions and discrimination by Turkish employers [15].

All these hard circumstances in Syria's neighboring countries, with the continuous and increasing violence inside Syria on all levels, which eliminated the choice of going back to Syria in the near future, forced many Syrians, including women, to undertake the dangerous journey to Europe - some of them with their families, and others alone or with people they knew and trusted.

### *Syrian Women Refugees' Situation in Europe from a Gender Perspective*

Fleeing to Europe was a completely new chapter in Syrian women refugees' life, to be described in more detail later. The majority of Syrian women did this trip illegally from Turkey to Greece, crossing then to Hungary from Macedonia before finally arriving in their final destination country in Europe. Undertaking this life-threatening trip induced huge changes in some of the Syrian women's life and gender roles. It strengthened some of them while increasing the trauma in others, taking into consideration that for a huge number of them it was not a choice but a must. But also the Syrian women who migrated to Europe legally from one of Syria's neighboring countries to be resettled or reunited with their families or who received a study visa or an invitation underwent many challenges and faced new opportunities.

Most of the Syrian women which I interviewed stated that they considered the European countries the safest place for them and for their family; a place where they would be able to forget their worries of not having a legal status and safe future. They worried about adopting a new culture, a new language and new social norms, though, in addition to the constant fear about what was happening in their home country and about the family members which they had to leave behind.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND RELEVANCE

The purpose of this research is to explore and understand the gender role changes of Syrian women refugees in Berlin, Germany, from the perspective of the Syrian women themselves by conducting interviews with them. The research explores how the interviewed women are acting in this new place, and how they are dealing with their culture, social norms, and language, in a country which is known for its progressive laws and social perspectives towards women. It focuses on exploring the interviewed women's concerns and expectations, and whether and how the refugee status and integration process are affecting their role shifting - positively or negatively.

The importance of this research comes from the fact that it relies on primary data. It aims to contribute to an improved understanding of the gendered impact of the Syrian conflict and refugee status of Syrian women in Berlin. It concludes with some suggestions and recommendations for more helpful and empowering policies and programs to support the integration process of Syrian women refugees.

## METHOD AND DATA

### *Research Methodology*

This research is qualitative in nature. The results are derived from interviews with and observations of Syrian women, interviewed in refugee accommodation centers in Berlin in the period July to December 2016. Interviews are the primary research method, with observation as complementary tool that may add some important details related to the situation of interviewed Syrian women in order to understand the big picture. Given my own background (I come from the same culture as the interviewed women) and my previous gender research project with Syrian women in Lebanon, it was clear to me that the women would not reveal their feelings and thoughts directly to me during the first meeting: In 2015, I wrote my Master thesis in "Women Studies" in Lebanon, for which I conducted interviews with Syrian women who had to flee to Lebanon and lived there in tents. I interviewed women in the refugee camps where I had been working with

an NGO for three years. It was not easy to do the interviews despite the fact that I had already built a trust relationship with them. The reasons behind this were manifold: the women were not used to talk about their own sufferings and concerns, especially after leaving their country and facing dozens of problems and challenges; they were afraid to be heard, although we were sitting apart from other people; and the main reason was the unhealed trauma with which they were living, hiding it inside in order to handle the daily challenges.

Based on the experience from my former research project, the following research design was used: The respondents should be Syrian women refugees, between 21-59 years of age (to guarantee that they were neither children when they decided to move to Germany, nor above age 60 which implies different asylum procedures in Germany) who fled from Syria to Berlin at least one year ago. The latter criterion was chosen in the hope that the interview partners would have already finished their asylum procedure and started their own integration and interaction process with the German society. However, it turned out that most of the women who volunteered to do an interview had arrived in Berlin in 2015 and were still living in the accommodation centers, waiting for the residency decision.

The interview partners were found in refugee accommodation centers, located in different areas in Berlin. Access to most of these centers was made feasible thanks to colleagues at the WZB Berlin Social Science Center and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung who worked as volunteers there as well as through some Syrian friends living in Berlin. For reasons of data protection, pseudonyms are used for the interviewed women throughout the research paper.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The main data analysis method used in this research is “Qualitative Content Analysis”. The nature of this research is exploratory and gets its value out of the local knowledge and understanding of the context, women’s experiences, meanings and relationship, social processes and contextual factors.

The main tool used in this research is “Individual Interview”. Most of these interviews were done in the places where the women were living. This was very



valuable and helpful to understand and analyze the recorded interviews. I asked prepared questions as base of the interview, but most of the time I asked new questions during the interview depending on the story or the information that the women were telling. Therefore the interview type can be described as semi-structured. Since the topic of the interview often covered a long time span in the women's lives, the interviews frequently turned out to be listening sessions rather than normal interviews. Before conducting the interview, I met the women first to introduce myself, to explain the purpose of the interview, and to take an appointment for undertaking the interview.

Before starting each interview, I explained to every woman that she had the right of not completing the interview whenever she felt uncomfortable and that she could pass any question she did not want to answer. Some women waited until I turned off the recorder to tell me some deep secrets and details, although they were informed beforehand that their names would not be mentioned in the research report or even recorded. The interviews were in Arabic, with an average length of 38 minutes.

Altogether, I interviewed 46 Syrian women aged between 21- 59 years, coming from different areas in Syria (Damascus, Damascus suburbs, Aleppo city, Aleppo suburbs, Latakia, Hama suburbs, Idleb and Homs). These women arrived in Germany at different times, but mostly in a time range between June 2015 and November 2015. The interviewees differed with respect to their marital status and education, and whether they were veiled or not, see Tables 1 to 3 below. These characteristics are not considered main variables in analyzing the data, but may still add to the understanding of some important issues and behaviors of the interviewed women from a gender perspective.

**Table 1: Marital Status**

Divorced	Married (husband not in Berlin)	Married (husband in Berlin)	Single
6	6	18	16

Divorced women got their divorce before coming to Germany; married women came without their husbands to Berlin, if their husbands were either detained or disappeared, could not leave Syria for certain reasons, or because of marital problems.

**Table 2: Education**

MA Degree	Bachelor Degree	Academic Degree	Elementary Degree
5	14	16	11

The educational qualification system in Syria differs between 4 degrees: The elementary degree is obtained after 12 years of schooling; an academic degree is any degree above the elementary school degree and less than bachelor degree; the length of the bachelor degree (university degree) in Syria depends on the major. For example, all bachelor degrees in Engineering take 5 years, bachelor degrees in Medicine take 6 years, all other majors take 4 years, and a bachelor degree cannot be less than 4 years. Any major less than 4 years is called an ‘institutional degree’.

**Table 3: Conservative (Veiled) vs. Non-conservative (Unveiled) Women**

Conservative (veiled)	Non-conservative (unveiled)
34	12

Although the interviewed women were not randomly selected, they turned out to belong to different Islamic sects (Sunni, Shea’a, Ismaeli and Durzi). However, no Christian Syrian women are represented in this sample. A woman is labeled “conservative” if she is veiled and “non-conservative” otherwise. The distinction between conservative and non-conservative women is made because veiled women may gain different experiences in Berlin than unveiled women.

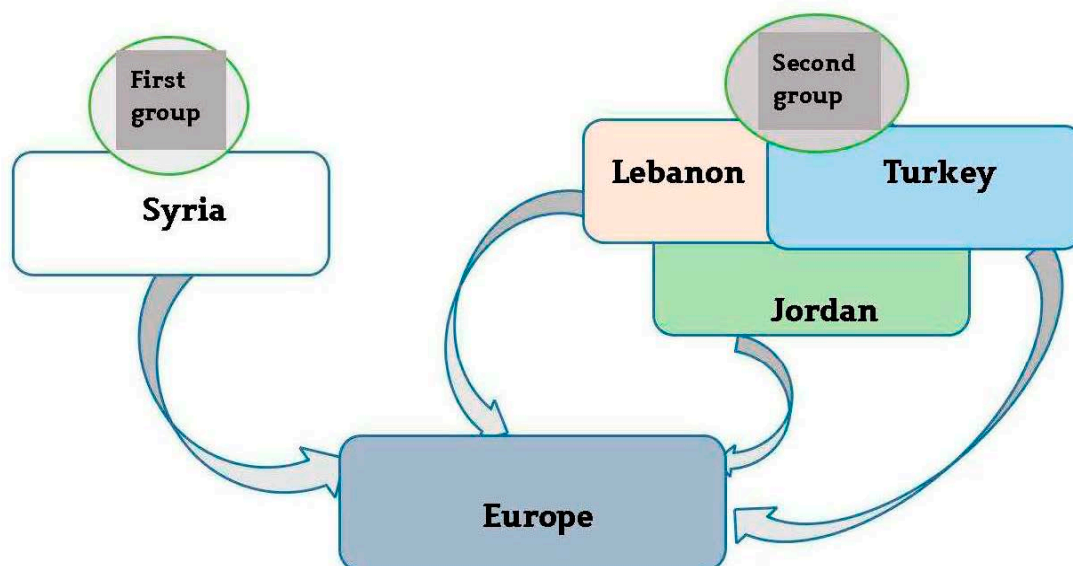
## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### *What are the Reasons Behind the Decision to Flee to Germany?*

Most of the interviewed Syrian women came to Germany illegally (42 out of 46) mastering a long, tiring and undignified trip, while the other 4 women came to Germany legally as students, then applied for asylum. All interviewed women left Syria seeking a safe place and a future after they lost housing, jobs, relatives, friends and a safe environment. 36 women reached the decision to flee to Europe on their own; 5 reached it together with their husbands; 2 women traveled with their families; the remaining women were encouraged by their daughters and sons who were already in Europe to come to Germany since the situation in their areas in Syria was very risky.

Women can be classified into two groups according to the circumstances and the countries from which they emigrated: Syria or the neighboring countries of Syria.

Figure 1: Migration Trajectories



The first group in Figure 1 comprises all women who managed or were forced to stay in Syria until 2015 (40%). They found in the opening of the Turkish borders the only and maybe last chance to survive. They were all aware that the borders

will not stay open for a long time, and they were kind of aware of the risk involved in crossing the sea on unprepared boats. For them, moving to Europe was mainly a means to put an end to the continuous shelling, death, fear, and hunger in their lives; briefly: to survive. They moved directly from Syria to Europe without a transition period in one of the neighboring countries.

The second group in Figure 1 comprises all women who left Syria in earlier stages (2011-2013) for one of the neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan) with the same aim of finding a safe place where they can continue their studies or put their children in schools or find jobs and with big hopes of returning to Syria within one or two years at maximum (60%). However, the situation in the neighboring countries was not as expected: The refugees had no clear legal status, and local laws were changed from time to time in response to the escalation of the situation inside Syria and to the increased number of Syrians fleeing to the neighboring countries. Most of the women considered their stay in these countries as “temporary” and considered either returning to Syria or continuing to one of the European countries their next step. Some felt that they had to move on because they had no possibility to travel or work, paired with a high probability to be blackmailed sexually or economically. Others needed to move on because of their health status, since it is very expensive to be treated in the neighboring countries, and it is kind of impossible to be treated in Syria, especially in besieged areas or areas under continuous shelling. *“I needed an end to all this misery; starting a new life in a country that may provide me with safety, future and a chance to bring my daughter and son here to live with me, or sinking into the sea and finishing this life...I was not afraid, God was with me,”* This is what Ruba said to me, then cried.

Choosing Germany as destination country was the second-best option for 20 women; they had originally planned to go to other countries such as Sweden, Finland, or England for different reasons (language, relatives, and better asylum conditions). But they changed their mind on their way since they were so tired, frustrated, and ran out of money. And the second-best destination was very close to them. Other women decided from the beginning to come to Germany because they had relatives and friends there and had heard often that the German

government and the German people would show more solidarity with the Syrian people than other countries. Yet another reason was the good and sometimes exaggerated feedback from Syrians who had applied for asylum before 2015 in Germany, had finished the asylum process very fast, and were treated in a very good way during the process. Therefore, they encouraged their friends and relatives to come to Germany even illegally (since it is very hard to come to one of the European countries legally as a Syrian).

Most of the women were very emotional when they started to describe the trip from Turkey to Germany. This trip had a different impact on them than whatever happened in Syria or in the places they moved to after leaving Syria. *"This trip was full of inhumanity and humiliation. I spent 15 days walking and sleeping outside in the cold, without any possibility of taking a bath and without being treated in a proper way, unless by some volunteers groups on the way who were trying to give us clothes and water. I arrived in Germany dead internally."* said Shams. She was one of the women who made this trip alone with a group of people that she already knew from Syria. However, the rest of the trip after crossing the sea was not the same for all of them, depending on when they undertook it (easier in September and October of 2015 than in the months before and after).

Whenever I asked whether there had been something special that happened to them as women during the trip, the women tried to evade the questions, insisting that women, men, and children were treated the same way. This reaction was expected, and I did not insist or tried to ask the same question differently since it is a very sensitive issue and it needs a whole separate process to deal with such GBV (Gender Based Violence) issues.

The women I interviewed did not reflect on whether or not such a trip was doable for a woman. Under conditions of war, displacement and insecurity, ordinary fears of such a dangerous journey as woman, especially with no other options available, are absent. Therefore, this step cannot be considered a radical change in the role of Syrian women who made this journey. Still, it can be considered a gradual change of circumstances that will reveal in some women their ability to do things they have never done before and may encourage them to continue self-

challenging. In contrast, it may generate a new state of trauma for other women because of the intensity of stressors and the risks they were exposed to. At the same time, some women who are aware of their abilities and roles will continue to move ahead with the fateful decisions they used to take even before the conflict.

### *Women's Experiences in Berlin: Expectations Versus Reality*

Interview respondents expressed that in Berlin, everything worked in a different way than what they were used to in Syria: They were treated as independent persons, who had to undergo the asylum process and integration process on their own, just as their male counterparts. Samira, a young married Syrian woman, stated: *"It was very hard in the beginning. I never used to handle my own papers, or go to governmental institutions, or have my own mail. My husband in Syria used to do all these things. Here I felt for the first time that my husband and I are two separate persons, not one"*. I had the same reaction from most of the married women, except for women with health issues.

However, all women expected easier and more transparent procedures. They expected a different treatment from the German authorities and organizations, especially as women, and expressed their frustration about the lack of information on what they were supposed to do. All mail was written in German which they could not read because they were still attending the German language courses for beginners. Lack of proficiency in German was also a major obstacle in dealing with employees in social welfare offices or job centers and made it difficult to explain problems or issues that they were facing, or to understand the instructions. Some, but not all, women managed to bring German speakers with them. According to most of the women, translators were provided by the job centers or other institutions but they were not available at all times. In addition, in some areas, they provided Syrian women and men with a list of people who volunteered to accompany them to their next appointment. However, these people were not always available either when needed.

It is clear that the experience in Berlin differed from one woman to another and mostly depended on the situations these women were facing when they arrived

in Berlin. It was much related to the asylum procedures and decisions which directly affected their life and plans. Some of them were lucky to receive their three years residency within three months, others had not received it by the time of the interview, and some interviewed women received only a protection residency for one year, which had different, mostly negative, implications [16]. Naturally, women who had received the asylum decision that they could stay for three years were relatively more comfortable to start planning their life, to start the procedure of reuniting with the rest of their family, and to start at least thinking about their possibilities during this period. In contrast, women who had not yet received any decision were very desperate, confused and traumatized. Not having a decision meant for them not being able to change their personal life: Not being allowed to work, not feeling safe but instead having to endure the temporary situation of the past six years that they were tired of. The situation was the same for women who had received a one-year protection only and were not granted asylum; they described how much this decision confused them and made them feel that they had to do what the German authorities requested them to do during this year, not what they wished to do. But they did not have any other choice since not following the procedures would put them at risk of not having renewed their residency after one year.

*“When I received the letter informing me that I got the one-year protection decision, everything turned black in front of me. This decision means that I cannot start the reunion procedure to bring my husband. I am worried all the time of what will happen after this year. If Turkey will allow us as Syrians to get a visa, I prefer to go back to Turkey and not stay here.”* This is what Nahla stated.

### ***Accommodation Centers are One of the Main Obstacles of the Gender Roles Changing***

Another big shock for the interviewed Syrian women were the accommodation centers. Most of the interviewed respondents felt offended to be put in such a place for at least 8 months.

I visited the accommodation centers where the interviewed women resided and made the following observations: The majority of accommodation centers had common bathrooms for all women, which is a nightmare, especially for veiled

women who have to pray regularly and have to wash certain parts of their body before praying. Furthermore, having common bathrooms used by many women caused hygienic problems in some places: *"I have to do a cleaning party before every prayer,"* said Sarab, a veiled Syrian woman.

The issue of privacy seemed to be the hardest issue for most of the interviewed women living in these accommodations; some of these places used to be sports halls, turned into housing for refugees, especially in 2015 when Germany received the largest number of refugees. In such places, all refugees are living and sleeping in one big hall. Veiled and unveiled women had to put a tent made out of blankets over their bed to have some privacy. However, these tents did not really give them privacy or safety since the center manager and the security employees had the right to open the tent whenever they wanted to check if someone was eating inside the tent or was doing anything against the accommodation center rules.

Sexual harassment was another great concern, especially for single or divorced women, and indeed happened to one of the interviewees: A male refugee and fellow occupant of the accommodation center attacked her with a knife after she had offended him on that day in front of some people. He was trying to force her to have a close relationship with him. She recounted to me: *"It was a very scary moment when he opened the blanket used as a separator in the room, holding a knife. But thank God, someone saw him coming towards my tent and kicked him in the back"*.

Other accommodation centers offered a bit more privacy. For example, in one of these centers, refugees were living in cabins (rooms without a ceiling) and the door was made of fabric. When I asked one of the social workers about the reason of not having doors and ceilings, she said: *"It is because of the safety policies since this place is not equipped yet with safety equipment and emergency exits in case of a fire"*. Some accommodation centers even had real rooms with real doors. However, refugees were not allowed to lock the room door. I asked the person in charge of the accommodation center about the reason of not allowing the refugees to lock their room doors, and his answer was: *"We have around 1000 rooms here and making locks with keys will cost us a lot, therefore we are providing them with lockers"*



*to lock away their own valuable stuff.”* The highest privacy was provided in accommodation centers where women refugees had their own apartments with a bathroom and a kitchen, or when women refugees were living in hotels paid by the German government until they could find an apartment. Hind, a married woman who came with her two kids to Berlin, said: *“Living for 9 months with no privacy, with no ability to cook what I want to eat, or have my own bathroom, or being able to take off my scarf during the day, meant hell for me. I feel weak, restricted and helpless, even in front of my children, I am not the strong Mom anymore who used to manage things and provide them with what they ask for.”*

The interviewed Syrian women who lived in the accommodation centers named several other factors which made them feel like they were living an undignified life, in particular as women: One important factor was the generalization used by the administration and social workers towards all refugees living in the accommodation center - they were all treated as if they had not learned anything before coming to Germany, and as if they had all come from one place and not from different countries and cultures. For example, there were signs inside the bathrooms to teach women how to use the toilet and how to use the sanitary pads during their menstruation period. Many women mentioned this during the interviews; some of them mentioned it, then laughed, while other cried.

Another important factor were the meals, which were provided in the same way in most of the accommodation centers that I visited: Prepared in a common kitchen, served at specific times, and only one kind of food for all refugees from all countries. Many women showed me their garbage to prove that they threw the meals away. Most of the dishes were of Turkish, Iranian or German style. Syrian families were able to accept it for one month, maybe, but not for one year. In some of the accommodation centers, Syrian women and men complained, and the administration changed the meals many times. In other accommodation centers, some women were allowed to help in cooking, while yet in others, women had to bring their own food from the market and eat it with their children secretly. Lobna, a Syrian divorced woman who had to move between different centers, said: *“I know that they are paying a lot of money to bring us food, and they are putting a lot of effort into cooking the food every day, but this is what makes me even angrier. They*

*have all the resources, and they have many women refugees and men refugees who are excellent in cooking, and we can do it for free, so why are they forcing us to eat this food? Use us! We are more than happy to do anything, to feel that we have a role in this life, even if this role is cooking food.”*

Women were frustrated because they felt inferior or incompetent since none of their qualifications or life experience was recognized in Germany in any way. In particular, interviewed women with academic degrees and professional experience in different fields felt underestimated on all levels. Some of them had offered their help in different fields (social work, psychosocial support, doing vocational training for other women, etc.) but felt that their offer was not taken seriously which in turn made them feel even worse. Similarly, the interviewed women who didn't have an academic degree but used to be very active at home, offering services like sewing, knitting, hairdressing, etc., felt that they could be productive and more independent, starting their own life. However, the asylum procedures and rules, the waiting period for the residency, the language and practice classes process, and the long stay in the accommodation center, all these circumstances prevented them from doing it which added to their trauma and lowered their motivation.

This is a negative change in gender roles since the Syrian women that I interviewed faced many challenges during the past five or six years which made them discover or strengthen their abilities to manage difficult situations and to be independent.

### ***Berlin Housing Market and Integration***

Although most of the women were still waiting for the residency decision, they had been looking for an apartment since they had arrived in Berlin. But finding an affordable apartment in Berlin is very difficult, and even women who had already received their residency decision were still living in the accommodation centers because they could not find one. The long waiting time of 8 to 12 months or even longer was a source of frustration for all of them since they considered having their own space as a first step towards feeling safe, starting their new life and starting the real integration process. The reasons for the long waiting time

were manifold: For instance, the social welfare office or the job center only subsidize apartments up to a certain monthly rent and space. And since there are many refugees looking for the same kind of apartments, it is very hard to find one unless a refugee pays between 2000 Euros and 5000 Euros illegally to the brokers who control the rental housing market secretly. And for sure, not all refugees have that much money nor do all of them want to be involved in such a process. Most of the interviewed women used online housing ads or relied on the volunteers to find apartments.

The interviewees also pointed out another problem, namely that most landlords refused to rent their apartments to people who depend on social benefits for reasons of questionable financial solvency since the social welfare office or job centers could cut benefits at any time.

Hana, a Syrian married respondent, said: *“My husband and I were looking for an apartment since February 2015. We organized everything in our life in a way that fits the searching process; my husband changed his language courses to be in the morning so he could go to viewing appointments in the evening while I would go in the morning. This forced me to postpone my language courses since someone should stay with our children after school”*.

### ***Change of Gender Roles and the Integration Process***

Questions about the women’s acceptance and understanding of the new culture they were dealing with in Berlin were answered differently by veiled women and unveiled women: For veiled or conservative women, living in Germany meant a new culture and new social norms; they felt that some of these norms were empowering them, as women in Germany are independent persons and have the same rights as men. This realization was giving them a space to redesign their life; some of them wanted to work or continue their studies, others were reconsidering and reevaluating their marital relationship, in particular women who came to Berlin without their husbands. The latter women didn’t worry any longer about financial support or child custody in case of a divorce, knowing that the German law would protect them much better than the Syrian law. However, these women still worried about being judged by their relatives and Syrian

friends as “selfish women” since they waited until they reached a safe place and then decided to get divorced, thus robbing the husband of his chances to come to Germany through the reunification process. Also, they were worried of depriving their kids of their father.

On the other hand, as veiled women they sometimes felt as being the target of German society’s prejudices via “conservative Muslim women”. Some veiled interviewees stated that they would not want to change their appearance or norms in order to be more accepted by the host society. Another major concern was related to their children who will be raised in a host society which accepts many things that are prohibited by the Islamic religion and has many social norms which are in conflict with the social norms of their (parents’) home country.

Some women told me that they were planning to take off the Hijab (a veil traditionally worn by Muslim women in the presence of adult males outside of their immediate family which usually covers the head) after moving to their own apartments because they felt monitored in the accommodation centers by the other Syrian families and judged as women who abandoned their religion for the sake of integration into this new society. Razan stated: *“No one will believe that I will take off the Hijab because I am not convinced of wearing it since I was in Syria, and no one will believe me that taking off the Hijab does not mean abandoning my religion, especially since there are several women in this accommodation center who gave bad examples after taking off the Hijab”*.

For the majority of interviewed unveiled and unreligious women, the picture was different; they did not feel that the German social norms regarding women would impede integration since these norms are very close to what they believe in, and for some of them, very close to what they were fighting for in their home society. They said they would feel more comfortable in Germany without being monitored or judged by people for what they were wearing, doing or believing. Hanadi, a single young woman said: *“I feel that this society is closer to me than my own country’s society when it comes to the way they treat woman and men”*.

All the interviewed Syrian women were interacting with refugees from different backgrounds in the accommodation centers. And since they spent a long time together living in the same building, eating at the same tables, doors non-existent or very close to each other, women started to feel that they were under continuous observation. Some reported that they sometimes heard many comments if they came home late or had short skirts on or spent the night outside the accommodation center. Rania, a highly-educated divorced woman living with her daughter, said: *“In Syria, I used to live in neighborhoods where people were a mix of conservatives and non-conservatives. I did not feel that I was observed by my neighbors while here in such a place as this center and in this lifestyle, where we all have to meet for eating, washing clothes or even outside the door, I feel that I am forced to deal with people from different backgrounds on a daily basis. I don't even feel comfortable to wear what I would be wearing in Syria.”*

### ***What Does Integration Mean to You?***

At the end of each interview, I asked the interview respondents about the integration process, what they knew about it, how they felt about it from a perspective as woman and as refugee, and which changes they would suggest if someone asked them to redesign the integration process. Interestingly, the word integration, “Indemaj” in Arabic”, provoked in most of the women as initial reaction: “Do you mean the languages courses?”

All of the interviewed women admitted that learning the language will help them a lot to integrate faster into the society. It will help them to deal with German authorities, render them independent of translators, and enable them to read mail in German and understand German signs and to communicate and interact with social workers and volunteers. At the same time, they expressed that being in this stressful and temporary situation was not really helping them to focus on the language courses.

In addition, interviewed respondents noted that they did not feel that such a process was helping them in integrating into the German society as women since they had almost no interaction with the German society. They mainly interacted with four categories of Germans: German employees in the relevant authorities,

social workers, security guards hired by the organizations or companies which run the accommodation centers, and the volunteers who visited the accommodation centers frequently. The latter category was the only one which they really appreciated and considered as a window to the German society. Some of the women said that without having these volunteers around them, their situation would be really harder. Volunteers helped them in translation, gave them advice, told them about the German society and sometimes they even grew friendships. Some volunteers invited some women to a meal with them in their home, introduced them to their families, and in some cases, they invited women to spend some days away from the accommodation center. As it seems, they really gave hope to some of the women, and helped them feel related to this yet-undiscovered society. At the same time, interviewed women expressed their regret that some people stopped working as volunteers after a while because they had their own life and work which prevented them from continuing this voluntary work.

During the interviews, there were many complaints about the administration and the security guards of the accommodation centers regarding the way they were dealing with the refugees. Interviewed women felt that they were sometimes treated as prisoners with no rights to complain or to suggest alternatives.

Some women were mostly annoyed by the unlimited permission given to some employees and security guards to interfere with the women, men and the whole family. For many of them, this increased the feeling of not being safe. Malak, a young Syrian/Palestinian woman, stated: *"The manager and security guards have the right to open doors or blankets whenever they want; they say it is for security reasons"*. In one of the accommodation centers, women mentioned that they were really afraid of some security guards, who were hired from outside the center, since two of them were extremely religious and kept telling women what to do and what not to do, and one of them proposed to marry more than one single woman. *"I escaped from Syria because I do not want such men to control my life. I did not expect to find them here."* says Wedad, a young Syrian woman. In another accommodation center, the manager decided one day to kick off all refugees, and the police came and did nothing since the manager was drunk.

Most women agreed that the integration process would really happen once they lived in an apartment or a house, had neighbors, and started a job or study. In their current conditions, they felt demotivated to put more effort into integrating into the temporary community and to participate in activities designed from only one point of view, namely that of the social workers. Nibal, aged 32, said: *“Some social workers really put up a lot of efforts and try to create activities for us but they do not really understand our needs, and it is very hard for most of us to explain it because of the language and the culture.”*

The same problem was mentioned by several social workers in different accommodation centers when I had the chance to discuss their work with them during my visits. They reported that most Syrian women and men did not show up for the activities. Moreover, they were frustrated that despite all activities and programs, they still felt a distance to most of the refugees.

Most of the interviewed women suggested integration activities with German women and German families; to get to know how they live, how they spend their time, how they raise their children. Also, many women suggested mutual integration activities which would allow them to also show their own culture, how they used to live in Syria, discuss their aims, concerns, and thoughts with German people.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Many researches, studies, and observations of gender role shifting of Syrian women in Syria and in the neighboring countries during the war and displacement show fundamental shifts in gender roles and responsibilities. Gender roles and responsibilities have been essentially reversed: while women increasingly participate in decision-making on income and expenditures and assume responsibilities outside the house, the man loses his role as the (sole) breadwinner and decision-maker. However, the exchange of roles is often incomplete, as women still shoulder the majority of household chores. If men develop negativity towards their new situations, this makes it harder for women, especially when this negativity turns into domestic violence. But even in these direst situations, Syrian women show remarkable resilience as they expand their role in families and communities.

Most of the Syrian women who moved to Europe took this decision after losing the hope of having a dignified and safe life in Syria or in one of the neighboring countries of Syria. They accepted to take the risk and undertake this journey in order to reach countries like Germany where they hoped to start a stable, respectful and dignified life, and where they would be able to deploy the experience that they had gained before and during the years of conflict and benefit from it as women.

Understandably, psychological trauma are a major issue affecting all interviewed women on different levels: The trauma of losing family members, seeing dead bodies, living under besiegement or daily shelling, escaping their countries and living in new temporary accommodation centers in one of the neighboring countries, handling hard economic and health situations, being a subject of exploitation on many levels; then, for most of them, undertaking a humiliating and dangerous trip, crossing the sea with a high probability of dying, walking long distances in cold or very hot weather, being detained in some countries on the road, until reaching their final destination - one of the European countries known for its respect of human rights. Reaching Berlin meant to all interviewed women to be treated as human beings after five years of being treated as a number or a nobody, to have a safe place and clear way of planning a new future



or to continue their plans that got postponed since 2011. Furthermore, it meant to them the chance to live a dignified life in which they would be treated with humanity, have their own place and privacy. None of them expected to live for one year or more in a temporary accommodation center again, with people from everywhere, with no privacy, with no recognition of their skills and abilities. They were treated during the asylum procedure in Berlin as if they were untraumatized and expected to already possess the language skills necessary to start the long and complicated asylum process and to deal with new procedures written in high-level German. In response, important decisions and laws were sometimes not understood, and therefore requested documents were not provided. Psychosocial support to help women refugees to establish minimum coping strategies in the new environment and to start healing the accumulated trauma was not provided by the social workers and was lacking in general. Neither were the social workers able to identify the women refugees' needs, challenges and concerns in order to design appropriate programs and activities. It was obvious from the interviews and from my observations during the visits as well as from some off-the-record chat with social workers that they were not able to truly understand the Syrian women's concerns and suggestions, which demotivated them in turn.

Negativity and frustration were the feelings which I observed in all interviews. Women were trying to show positivity sometimes, but having a space to tell their stories, concerns, and suffering gave them the chance to show their real feelings. Most of the women stopped talking many times during the interview and cried, but then insisted on continuing as if it was a chance for them to talk about their suffering to someone from their own culture, someone to whom they could speak in their own language. They were aware that Germany was one of the few countries that accepted to receive Syrian refugees, and they expressed their gratitude, especially when comparing Germany's reaction towards the Syrian refugee crisis to most of the Arab countries' reactions. Indeed, most of them closed the door in front of the Syrians or issued visa only under very hard conditions, except for the neighboring countries which took a very heavy burden, equal to or even larger than that of the European Union. Still, most of the interviewed women were shocked about the asylum procedures in Germany: The

long asylum process, living in temporary accommodations, not finding apartments to move into, not having social workers who can speak and understand their concerns and needs. At the same time, they kept thinking of the rest of their families, their parents, husbands and kids, who were still living in Syria or in one of the neighboring countries, waiting for them, “the women”, to start the reunion process. However, the latter was put into question when German authorities changed the law with respect to family reunification in response to the huge number of refugees in 2015.

The reactions of the interviewed women to the previously described situations were noticeably different: Some of them were totally demotivated, sitting idle most of the day, using their smartphones to communicate with their friends and relatives in Syria or in one of the neighboring countries, and just left their residence to go to the social welfare office or to job center appointments. Others were participating in the language courses and “Praktikum” courses (vocational courses) while waiting for the residency decision. This difference in their reactions was not only related to different personal coping mechanisms, but also correlated with the progress in their asylum process upon which their future life will depend. Thereby, women who used to work either at home or outside their home and highly-educated women were exceedingly frustrated because their expectations that they would be able to use their skills and qualifications in Germany were not met at all. Indeed, they were not even given a chance to help with the integration process, even when they possessed the personal and professional skills for this task. In the end, the whole system reminded them constantly that they were also refugees, and that they all had to follow the same procedures.

In my view, all these circumstances slowed down the positive change in gender roles which some of the interviewed women had already undergone. In response, it made some of them feel now that the roles that they used to have in Syria before the crises had been safer and had given them more stability in their life.

These procedures, which applied to every single woman refugee, took back these women to the “temporary situation”, a situation they had to live in since 2011 in

Syria or outside Syria. Traumatized women had to live again in temporary and public places, with new people from different cultures and backgrounds monitoring them all the time. The accommodation centers and the whole long asylum process created new communities, neither Syrian nor German, and hence created a distorted picture of the German society since Syrian women were just dealing with certain categories of Germans. This situation increased the concerns and fears of Syrian women and made them feel even more stressed which may in turn trigger negative and resistant attitudes and contribute to a distorted picture of them, too.

In summary, it can be concluded that the living conditions and circumstances associated with the asylum process did not support a fast integration into the German culture and society, at least not for the interviewed women. It did not make them more confident and open towards the new changes and even influenced some women negatively in their gender role change. It reduced them to the common status of a “refugee” who has to follow certain procedures in order to be accepted in this new society. This status made them feel vulnerable during the asylum and integration process instead of giving them the space to decide freely on what to be and on how to deploy their skills and experiences. Again, this cannot be generalized towards all interviewed women, since everyone reacted in a different way towards this situation, but this is the common atmosphere that was reflected during the interviews.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *Recommendations for Future Studies*

This research highlights the gender role change, which is a slow and long-term change process. I collected the research information and conducted all the interviews in Berlin with Syrian women who came to Germany at least one year ago. For more comprehensive findings and for a comparative perspective, it would be beneficial to interview Syrian women refugees in at least two other cities in Germany, especially since regulations, procedures and sometimes social norms differ among the German states. The results of this study are by no means generalizable; however, they can give a very good idea of and a starting point for further research. Due to the time limitation of the study (six months from July till December 2016), the circumstances of Syrian refugees in Berlin at that time and the long asylum process, I had to do my research in a period of time where most of the interviewed Syrian women were still living in refugee accommodation centers. It would therefore be interesting to repeat the interviews in two to three years to study in how far the women's aspirations have come true.

### *Recommendations for Integration Policies*

This research was done in a very transitional period, in which the interviewed women were still very traumatized and stressed and uncertain under which conditions they would be able to shape their life in the future, whether they would be able to integrate and be accepted in this new society or not, or whether the situations would change in Syria and they would have the chance to decide to stay or to go back. Taking into account the women's perspective and their concerns and needs in this critical period may help to improve the integration process for both sides, the Syrian women and the German society, and may highlight some very sensitive issues that have not yet been taken into consideration by the responsible parties, civil society, and acting organizations in designing their programs and policies toward Syrian women refugees.

Major complaints of all interviewed women with respect to the accommodation centers were lack of privacy (resulting in e.g. social monitoring by security guards

and assessment center administration or even other refugees, limitations in the practice of religion, and harassment), lack of independence and the limited possibilities to get in touch with the German society. Shortening the stay of newcomers or refugees in these temporary accommodation centers and enhancing the process of finding houses and apartments in Berlin would be important means to avoid frustration and demotivation which are detrimental to integration. In the meanwhile, monitoring these centers in ways that prevent sexual harassment or violation of the privacy policies would be very helpful for all women in these centers.

Furthermore, applying a participatory design approach for the psychosocial support process of Syrian women would clearly lead to better integration results as it would help them to feel better understood and valuable and would motivate them to be more active and less negative. Also, applying this approach in all future plans and programs designed for women, men and children refugees would speed up the integration process and decrease challenges on all levels for both sides, the German society and the refugees.

Although the German volunteers were showing great support for some of the Syrian women refugees, they were not always around them when needed. On the other hand, the dependence on volunteers as major support enabled them to interfere with the refugees' lives unintentionally. It is therefore important to increase the interaction between the society in Berlin with all its different categories (women, men, teenagers, and children) and the Syrian refugees with similar categories in well-designed programs and activities as this will help to reduce prejudices for both groups (refugees and the host society) faster and to build positive relationships.

Giving Syrian women refugees and other women refugees the chance to choose the change they want to undergo and to find the best ways of being integrated as women into the new environment, laws and norms can help a lot in a better understanding of the new situation and the options that they have, which will lead to a healthier gender roles changing based on their will with the help of German experience in dealing with gender issues.

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