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**Forced Migration and Gender
Relations: The Impact of
Displacement on Masculinity
among Syrian Refugees**

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Forced Migration and Gender Relations: The Impact of Displacement on Masculinity among Syrian Refugees

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at exploring the impact of forced migration on masculinity among Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It contributes to the debate about gender and forced migration by focusing on the particular dimension of the Syrian displacement in Lebanon – its protracted temporality. I argue that when Syrian refugee men lose their role as providers in displacement, they also lose their “space” in the public sphere, while they do not gain a new one in the private sphere. In displacement, individuals are often forced to rethink themselves and their relationships in a new social field, where gender roles and identities can be transformed. Yet, if they are constantly reminded that they cannot be permanent residents of the host country, and at the same time they are offered no alternative, they end up living in a suspended state. Drawing on Bourdieu’s epistemology, I argue that Syrian males’ habitus in Lebanon is “suspended” because the specific dimension of displacement prevents them from facing the crisis through reflexivity. In fact, they cope by attempting to reaffirm their masculinity through forms of protest.

INTRODUCTION

The violence caused by the Syrian conflict and the resulting forced migration and displacement have torn families apart and challenged traditional gender roles and relations. By fleeing a war and “becoming refugees”, not only individuals have to come to terms with the loss of their family members and the destruction of their properties. They also have to deal with the consequences that forced displacement brought into their relationships – economic hardship, unemployment, and traumas. As a result, child marriages, domestic violence, and divorces have increased among families in displacement (Karasapan 2017).

The literature has extensively approached forced migration through a gender dimension (See: Enloe 1991; Turner 1999 and 2001; Berg and Millbank 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2010 and 2014; Dhoest 2018), with a number of resources focusing on Syrian women and the impact of displacement on their lives (Harvey et al. 2013; Mhaissen 2014; Haddad 2014; Christophersen 2014; Buendia 2014; El Masri et al. 2015; Al Hayek 2015; Williamson 2016). Similarly, the interest on the impact of displacement on Syrian men is growing, and both academic literature (Turner 2016, 2019a and 2019b; Allsopp 2017; Suerbaum 2018) and grey literature (IRC 2016²; Keedi et al. 2017; El Feki et al. 2017) looked extensively at the consequences of forced migration on masculinity. Nevertheless, scholarly debates about forced migration and gender relations have often failed to tackle the specific dimension of the Syrian displacement – its protracted temporality. The reason for this condition lies behind the specific legal and bureaucratic framework wherein Syrians stand when they flee to neighbouring countries. On the one hand, receiving states like Lebanon reject the international

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² See 2016 IRC’s report: *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugee Men in Lebanon*. Retrieved on July 15, 2018 from: <https://www.rescue.org/report/vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugee-men-lebanon>.

refugee law regime (Janmyr 2017), and do not recognise Syrian nationals officially as refugees (dimension of temporality). On the other hand, Syrians are not offered a safe solution to end their condition of displacement, and so to return to their homes, or an alternative plan to be resettled to a third country (dimension of protraction). Looking at the consequences of displacement through this lens is the aim of this article. Furthermore, I aim at analysing the specific dimension of gender relations in forced migration, by exploring the impact of displacement on masculinity. In displacement individuals are often forced to rethink themselves and their relationships in a new social space, where gender roles and gender identities may change. The previous gender regime “falls apart” and a new one has to be renegotiated, as women and men face new circumstances and responsibilities. Yet, if individuals are constantly reminded that they are not welcomed in the host country, and at the same time they have no chance to move back or forward, they end up living in an indeterminate, or suspended, state.

Two research questions have guided this study. First, what happens when individuals find themselves displaced not only from their homes, but also from their previous (gendered) social space? And second, how do refugees come to terms with this loss in a situation of protracted temporary displacement? To answer these questions, I look empirically at the specific situations in which Syrian refugee men lose their social space in displacement and not gain a new one. Drawing on Bourdieu’s epistemology, I argue that because of this disruption of social space, there is a misalignment of *habitus* and the new *field* of gender, which results into a crisis. Normally, such a crisis could be negotiated through *reflexivity*, but due to the protracted temporality of displacement, it ends up being damaging, resulting in what I call a *suspended habitus*. The consequence of this is the use of masculinity as a form of protest.

In the following paragraphs, I first give an overview of the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. I frame the gender regime under which they used to act before displacement, and explore the challenges of fulfilling the main dimension of the masculinity identity – the capacity of being providers of their family. Next, I describe the study and the methodology. I then move on to the conceptualization of suspended habitus through the empirical analysis of the particular situation where Syrian refugee men lose their gendered social space without gaining a new one. Finally, I discuss the direct consequence of this disruption and the reaffirmation of masculinity through forms of protest.

THE SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

The Syrian uprising and the conflict ongoing since 2011 resulted in one of the worst refugee crisis in history, with the Syrians being today the largest forcibly displaced population in the world, internally and across borders (UNHCR 2018)³. Lebanon, a bordering country with Syria has received over a million refugees since the outbreak of the crisis⁴ (Ibid. 2018). Nonetheless, the situation is particularly challenging because Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention. With its “no camp policy” the government rejected encampment to prevent the Syrian presence in Lebanon from becoming permanent, as had happened with the Palestinians. Furthermore, Syrians in Lebanon are not considered “refugees” but “displaced persons” (Mourad 2017). Until 2014, the Lebanese government maintained an open border policy whereby registered

³ See: UNHCR data (2018): <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees>.

⁴ The exact number cannot be confirmed as the registration of Syrian refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ceased in 2015 at the request of Lebanese authorities. According to UNHCR, in 2015 Syrians were displaced all over the six districts. The largest numbers (373,124) were hosted by the Beqaa Valley (Arsal) and the North (Akkar). These areas include the most vulnerable and poor communities of Lebanese. Lebanon is also a country with the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide as it is hosting around 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees, some 320.000 unregistered, 30.675 registered Palestinian refugees from Syria, 6.000 Iraqi refugees and nearly 280.000 refugees from Palestine. See: UNHCR data (2018): <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/partner.php?OrgId=49>. Retrieved on July 13, 2019.

Syrian refugees could live and work in Lebanon. No specific regulation was applied to them, and the state absence in this period was largely understood and broadly referred to as a “policy of no policy” (El Mufti 2014). As a result, the current set of responses to the refugee crisis in Lebanon is decentralized, fragmented, and governed by informality, whereby arbitrary actions are taken by the local municipal authorities, who are now governing the refugee presence together with local and international humanitarian actors (Mourad 2017). While non-encampment may have allowed a greater freedom of movement for refugees, the lack of adoption of an alternative protection and shelter policy created challenges for both the UN and the local communities who became the primary respondents to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon (Boustani et al. 2018). This has affected Syrians on a humanitarian level, because since Lebanon rejected the international refugee law regime, refugees are not entitled to protection or resettlement. The UNHCR stopped the registration of Syrians as *de facto* refugees in 2015 (Dionigi 2016). As a result, the only option left for those who were unable to register before that window closed (Ibid. 2016) was to remain in Lebanon with a work permit. However, the labour market for refugees is mostly regulated by informality, as formally Syrians are allowed to work only in three sectors: construction, agriculture, and cleaning services. Yet, unless they have a sponsor (*kafeel*), they cannot obtain a regular work permit (Tirado Chase 2016). Since early 2015, the Lebanese government also prevented refugees registered with the UNHCR from working (Ibid. 2016). As a consequence, obtaining a valid residency became very difficult for Syrian nationals. Living without valid residency is also an obstacle to their mobility as being irregular entails the risk of being stopped at checkpoints and arrested. However, the mobility of Syrian men is more restricted than women’s as the latter are less likely to be stopped or arrested (El Asmar et al. 2019), and therefore they are able to move more freely across checkpoints than men. As a result, and because of the absence in many households of adult men, a number of Syrian women entered the job market to support their families. Nevertheless, women are more likely to be underpaid, employed in the black market, or exploited (Ibid. 2019).

The engagement of women in the job market and the growing number of female-headed households in Lebanon have led to many changes in traditional gender structures (UN Women 2018).⁵ Traditionally, women’s roles and responsibilities were largely confined to the home. Historically, Syrian women were not particularly active in the workforce. UN country data reveals that as of 2010, 13,3% of women were part of the labour force, compared to 72,7% of men.⁶ Literature anticipates that despite higher level of education that women obtained compared to men⁷, Syrian women’s participation in the public sphere was limited by both social and political factors (Williamson 2016). Gender is an important variable to understand most Arab societies, including Syria, as it is one of the main determinants of social status. Among Muslims, in particular, men and women constitute distinct social groups, interacting only within the private sphere. A rigorous division of labour between the sexes is observed in most social settings, with the exception of some limited professional activities carried out by urban educated women (Kelly and Breslin 2010). As the roles of man and woman in family life differ significantly, so do social expectations. Syrian men traditionally associate their masculinity with their work, as their central socially defined role is the role of provider (Keedi et al. 2017). They maintain the productive role by being the breadwinners of the family, while Syrian women traditionally take on the (social) reproductive role, or the

⁵ According to UN Women (2018), 52% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are women. See *Unpacking gendered realities in displacement: the status of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon*. Retrieved on January 12, 2019 from: <http://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/2018/16-days/syriacrisisimpact-lebanon-final2.pdf?la=en&vs=3545>.

⁶ Unsurprisingly the outbreak of the war has increased unemployment among both the female and male population – with estimates of 9.2% in 2005 to 13.2% in 2014. See: UN Data Country Profile, Syrian Arab Republic: http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx/_Images/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=Syrian%20Arab%20Republic. Retrieved on January 12, 2019.

⁷ In particular, 63.1% of women attended secondary school compared to 62.8% of men. See UNICEF Education Data 2013: https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/syria_statistics.html. Retrieved on January 12, 2019.

caretaking role (El Feki et al. 2017). Displacement has changed the capacity of many men to remain breadwinner of their families, with a loss of work often leading to a loss of self-esteem (Keedi et al. 2017). Many Syrian male refugees interviewed for this research still identified their masculinity with their capacity to work. Those who were unable to work felt that their masculinity identity was undermined.

METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a PhD study about the impact of displacement on gender roles and gender relations. The research was carried out through qualitative methods. Primary data were collected in Lebanon between March and September 2018 in two urban centres (Beirut and Tripoli), and two rural areas (Akkar and the Beqaa Valley). I carried out 44 individual in-depth interviews with Syrian refugee men and women; three focus-group discussions with Syrian refugee men and women; 13 individual consultations with local and international organizations, experts, social workers, and practitioners; and one focus-group discussion among experts and practitioners. Participant and non-participant observation has been carried out for several weeks in the areas of the Beqaa and Akkar. The household was my unit of data collection. First, I identified three types of Syrian families in displacement (nuclear, extended, and single-headed family); then, I selected my participants through existing networks, or following a random sampling selection. Participants were Syrian men and women aged between 25 and 65 years old who had married in Syria and had been displaced for at least one year.

Individual interviews, the main empirical tool used for this article, focused on division of labour and roles inside and outside the house, in Syria and in displacement; decision-making processes at home and abroad; and on perceptions, aspirations, and challenges that men and women experienced in displacement. The other main empirical tool used for this study was observation. For several weeks, I participated more or less directly into the life of one family displaced in the Beqaa Valley, and the community around them. My ethnographic approach was a complete and partial participation – I was at times participating completely in the activities of the family (e.g. cooking with them), at time partially (e.g. as a guest). The family was fully aware of my research, although not all the members knew of my role as observer among them. This overt/covert observation was employed to avoid the so-called “paradox of the observer” (Labov 1972), in order to be able to observe natural attitudes and behaviours without pushing people to act in a different way because they were observed. Throughout the observation phase, I recorded data and observation through fieldnotes. As the process of writing was for me also a self-reflexive exercise, my research diary provided me with a tool through which subjective and objective aspects of my research were able to interact (Newbury 2001). This particular aspect informed my theoretical approach and in particular my interest in exploring the interactions between agency and structure in refugeeness.

THE EFFECTS OF DISPLACEMENT ON MASCULINITY

In this paper, I draw on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and its concept of *habitus* to conceptualize masculinity as *performed* by male Syrian refugee males in Lebanon. I base my analysis on the assumption that gender is socially constructed and embodied in its representation in society at large. In this sense, gender should be understood as a performance based on social constructed aspects and behaviours, and not as a biologically determined predisposition related to sex (Butler 1990). Habitus is a “structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices.” (Bourdieu 1984: 170). It is a range of dispositions and predispositions that subconsciously guides behaviours and perceptions of actors in various social spaces, or *fields*. Gender is not a field of action itself but part of a field, which is Bourdieu’s general social field (Adkins 2004). Gendered habitus is also structured by social norms, which not only enhance a gendered division of labour and space, but also create a “vision” that makes this division “natural.”

Although the intersection of the concepts of habitus and gender has been largely discussed in literature (Dumais 2002; Gorely et al. 2003; McNay 1999), before introducing the empirical study, it is important to mention the enduring debate about the fluidity/rigidity of habitus. The theory of habitus has been largely criticised as an overly deterministic concept (Adams 2006; King 2000; Reay 2004). Critiques have argued that the concept of habitus excludes the possibility of social change or agency of individuals. Because it is deeply inscribed in individuals, the habitus rarely or never changes (Adams 2006; Jenkins 1994; King 2000; Reay 2004). Other authors have argued about the fluidity of habitus. They claimed that criticisms focused on Bourdieu's early works and are based on misinterpretation of Bourdieu's theory (Baxter and Britton 2001; Horvat and Davis 2011; Lee and Kramer 2013). In fact, they asserted that Bourdieu admitted the possibility of habitus' alteration. For example, these studies showed empirically that habitus can be altered when the social environment changes (Reay 2004; Gilbert 2013; Lehman 2013). As early as in *Le Sens pratique* (1980), Bourdieu explained that classificatory structures are unlikely to be permanently perpetuated without modification. For example, specific events such economic transformations are able to alter the distribution of capitals (Weininger 2005). This is the case in forced migration where the balance of economic capital between genders is likely to change in favour of the dominated gender.

Some authors proposed that in migration studies we should always read the concept of habitus as interrelated with the concept of field (Jo 2013). While the habitus is related to the subjectivity, the field focuses on the objective aspect of the practice (Grenfell and James 1998). Once the two concepts are tied together, it is reasonable to assume that if individuals face unfamiliar fields, their habitus can be altered (Bourdieu 1980). This is why Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) described habitus as a flexible concept when they defined it as a "feel for the game" or a "sense for the game." In this sense, by looking at the experiences of individuals facing a situation when their old habitus does not synch with the new social setting, many authors have focused on the transformation or alteration of habitus (for example: Baxter and Britton 2001; Cornbleth 2010; Harris and Wise 2012; Horvat and Davis 2011).

Bourdieu approached the interrelation between sexes in the social sphere widely in *La domination masculine* (1998). He understood this relationship through the concept of power. To Bourdieu, power is culturally and symbolically created and often legitimised by actors through the interaction of agency and structure. Power requires a dominant actor and a dominated actor, that tacitly and mutually agree on their own power relation (Bourdieu 1998). In normal *état des choses*, the dominant part (the male habitus) has hegemony over the dominated part (the female habitus), and this hegemony is essentially symbolic. This symbolism makes the division between genders "natural" (Bourdieu 1998). But what happens to this "natural setting" when individuals are in a "crisis"? In other words, what happens when individuals find themselves displaced not only from their homes, but also from the social space where they used to act according to the "natural division"? Many of my participants agreed that in displacement, gender responsibilities and roles changed because women and men are asked to act according to new "settings." This role reversal also changed power relations. Mohammad, one participant displaced in Tripoli, claimed:

Women were weak in Syria, but now they are taking the roles of men! Back in Syria, the man never allowed his wife to work outside. However, this is not the case right now because unlike men, women are easily finding jobs. Thus, they (the women) are the ones earning money and paying the expenses.⁸

Mohammad later explained that he felt embarrassed to tell people in Syria that in Lebanon his wife worked:

⁸ Interview with Mohammad, a Syrian man displaced in Tripoli, Lebanon. September 2018.

I feel ashamed. We need my wife's salary here, of course, but it's shameful for me that she works outside. I can't tell anyone in Syria... they would not accept this. Women should not participate into the public life!⁹

Mohammad raised here the point of the patriarchal framework of the Syrian society prior the war. The Syrian authoritarian regime always promoted a patriarchal setting of the society where women's engagement in the labour market was not supported (Joseph 1996). As a result, the full citizen of the state was the man, not the woman. In this sense, Mohammad embodied the masculine identity as part of his national identity.

In normal *état des choses*, the dominant habitus and the dominated habitus interact in a tacit mutual understanding of their positions. Yet, the dominant one is characterised by perceptions and dispositions that resist change especially when change undermines its power status. In contrast, the dominated habitus is characterised by perceptions and dispositions, which are more conducive to change and transformation especially when the required change in these perceptions and dispositions are likely to result in empowerment (Bourdieu 1998). Roqayah and Baasilia are two Syrian women who had never worked before displacement. Yet, in Lebanon, they were forced to enter a space that in Syria they were not allowed to access.

I came to Lebanon in 2013, only with my children. My husband stayed in Syria, and did not want me to come. But I came anyway because I wanted to protect my children [...]. For the first two years after we came, my son was working. I was not allowed to work. My husband in Syria did not want me to work, but he was not sending money for us to live. So I convinced him and I started working. At the beginning it was horrible. But then I liked it because I was independent. Of course I didn't like to have all the responsibilities! [...] The relationship with my husband changed a lot after I came here and I started working. He started participating less in decisions about my life and in our children's life. I think I should divorce him now. I have no other choice.¹⁰

As we can see from Roqayah's words, the new position she was forced to take on changed her relationship with her husband. By working she gained the power to support the family – with the burden of the responsibilities – and so to become economically independent. Nevertheless, she also became socially independent from her husband by considering the idea of divorcing him.

When I came to Lebanon I started working for the first time in my life. I never worked in Syria before, my husband would not accept that, he's a traditional man; he thought he was the one responsible for supporting the family and I was the one who was in charge of the house and the children. But here in Lebanon he changed his mind. When we found ourselves in a difficult financial situation he agreed to let me work. [...] I think the only reason why he accepted that is because we are in difficult conditions, and because I work only with other women.¹¹

As expressed by Baasilia, because of the extraordinary situation, the acceptance of women entering the workforce in opposition to, or along with, men seems to be a situational acceptance. This means that the new division of roles is not expected to be permanent if the situation stays temporary.

Syrian men traditionally act in the masculine dominated public space (defined by Bourdieu as the market, or the place of assembly) in opposition to the feminine dominated private space (the house). In Bourdieu's terms, it is precisely when men find themselves to act in the feminine public space (the house, a field where they are not dominant) that their habitus is not in line with the field

⁹ Interview with Mohammad, a Syrian man displaced in Tripoli, Lebanon. September 2018.

¹⁰ Interview with Roqayah, a Syrian woman displaced in Tripoli, Lebanon. June 2018.

¹¹ Interview with Baasila, a Syrian woman displaced in Chtoura, Lebanon. March 2018.

anymore and it becomes disrupted. Syrian men who participated in this study positioned themselves and their gendered role in the public sphere. In particular, they associated their identity as men with their capacity to provide for their families. Those who were unable to work felt that their position in the public sphere was undermined. In addition, in households where women worked, men had to engage in domestic and caring activities. Ghiath for example, had to take on the responsibilities of housework, but instead of considering as his own newly gained responsibility he described it as “helping out” his wife.

I do help out my wife in the house with domestic work and with taking care of our child. We both work and I understand that sometimes she needs my help. But we do not tell people because I do not feel comfortable with people knowing it. This is the way we organize our life and there is no need for people to know.¹²

Ghiath’s felt not comfortable in this new social space (the private one), and with this new role he could not act in the previous one (the public one). He felt ashamed, because masculinity, or manliness, has to be validated by other men, and by the male community that measured whether one was a “real men” (Bourdieu 1998:52).

Middle-class men interviewed for this study expressed even a minor disposition to accept their new roles. For example, Abed, a middle-class man from Aleppo, was forced to take on the social reproductive role in his family, while his wife worked in Syria and commuted from Lebanon.

Because of the situation here [i.e. his condition of unemployment in Lebanon], my wife is still working in Syria, so sometimes she goes for three months and comes back for one month. This is also putting a strain on the family because now I have to do everything in the house. Sometimes I have to cook, I have to clean, and I have to take responsibilities for the girls when they go outside, to school, and everything. This is putting a lot of pressure on me because I have to do everything by myself. [...] There’s nothing in my hands that I can do.¹³

Abed always worked and supported his family in Syria, and before the outbreak of the war in 2011, his wife was also working. Abed’s precarious situation in Lebanon and his age (52 years old) did not provide him many chances to maintain the same role he previously had in Syria, while his wife had been able to find work. This new development made him feel deeply insecure. As a result, he found himself having troubles coming to terms with this new role, because his habitus and its embodied form, shaped by his social class and the gender field in which he was always immersed, did not fit with this new reality. Eventually, the participant expressed his desire to return to Syria in order to regain his previous role and, through the engagement in the labour market, regain his masculinity.

The situation in Lebanon is devastating for me because the most important thing for a man is to work and if I don’t have a job then... what’s the point of me? I staying at home, I have nothing to do, nowhere to go. I decided to go back to Syria, I am just waiting for my daughter to finish her exams and then I’ll move back.¹⁴

In Lebanon, Ghiath and Abed faced a new field of action, which they did not recognise as familiar. In this case, there was a misalignment of field and habitus, with the result of a crisis (Crossley 2003). Now, a disjuncture of habitus and field can normally be negotiated through reflexivity. Nonetheless, I argue that for refugees in a protracted temporary displacement, crises rather than being reflexive and generating capital are often damaging and disrupting. Protracted crises, in

¹² Interview with Ghiath, a Syrian man displaced in Chtoura, Lebanon. March 2018.

¹³ Interview with Abed, a Syrian man displaced in Tripoli, Lebanon. May 2018.

¹⁴ Ibid.

particular, make the experience embedded into future social relationships since the durability of the habitus is less susceptible to transformation (McNay 1999). It is essentially because the crisis is still considered temporary that there is no employment of reflexivity – as individuals are still living in a survival mind-set. Because circumstances are taken on as temporary, change cannot happen permanently. In the case for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, when temporary displacement becomes prolonged, individuals cannot adapt to the new standards imposed by the new field. This *décalage* between Syrian male habitus and the newly transformed field of gender in which they find themselves immersed following their displacement makes them experience a “suspended habitus.” I argue that the direct consequence to this situation is the expression of masculinity as a form of protest.

Protest masculinity of Syrian male refugees

Protest masculinity is the whole of collective practices operated by marginalized men who struggle for their hegemonic masculinity, but do not have the tools to achieve it, or they have lost them (Connell 1995). These individuals develop their own forms of dominant expression, often in the form of aggressive behaviours towards women and children, or with non-violent protest behaviours. In order to compensate to the loss of their patriarchal role, Syrian refugee men develop a protest attitude, which is driven by the anxiety and uncomfortable circumstances they experience. They react with using masculinity as a form for protest especially when they are unable to fulfil their expectations, their wives’ expectations, and the community’s expectations of being provider of their families.

Throughout the Syrian refugee crisis, domestic violence appeared as the most common expressions of protest masculinity. It ranges from psychological, to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. It is rooted in inequalities and discriminations between genders and it is related to power imbalances. Syrian refugees are already subjected to power imbalances and discriminations, because in Lebanon they have fewer rights. When gender issues come into play, for both men and women there is a double discrimination. Domestic violence as a form of gender-based violence is a ubiquitous practice that has no social, economic, and national boundaries. In Lebanon and Syria, domestic violence against women and children existed before conflict and displacement, among all social classes. Nonetheless, whenever there is a breakdown in the routine, especially when it is a negative one, violence exacerbates. Lama, one of our female participants, confirmed that her husband became more violent because of the harsh conditions he faced after displacement:

My husband is angrier since we became refugees. He became violent. He has no job and he spends many hours in the house. You see... we have a small house, only one room for the five of us. There is no privacy. He has a lot of problems and a lot of pressure. He sometimes beat the children and me...¹⁵

According to local organizations working with Syrian refugees, domestic violence also resulted as a response to the inability of finding coping mechanisms to deal with the strains associated with the loss of a power position in the family as a whole.¹⁶

Violence is not the only approach men use to reaffirm their masculinity. Another way is through non-violent punishing behaviours. In my fieldwork, I came across the experience of a sixty-year old Syrian man, who lives with his family in the Lebanese region of the Beqaa. After displacement into Lebanon he was not able to find a job and provide for his family. His older daughter, Ward, was supporting the whole family with her work.

¹⁵ Interview with Lama, a Syrian woman displaced in Chtoura, Lebanon. June 2018.

¹⁶ Consultation with a local organization in Beirut, Lebanon. January 2018.

Ward told me that her father often says that he feels like furniture in this house... “I am like a chair,” he says. That’s not only because he is not working and he feels useless, unable to provide for his family, but also because he’s not the centre of the family life anymore. His wife does not sit with him to have lunch anymore, she waits for Ward to come back from work and she eats with her. Ward’s mother seems not to recognise the authority of her husband, and now she seems to account Ward’s role of breadwinner in the house. Ward also told me that when her father is angry with his wife he does not let her prepare his breakfast. He goes to the kitchen and tries to prepare it by himself, but he does not know where all the dishware is, so he does not manage to do it.¹⁷

The reaction of Ward’s father to his wife’s attitude towards him was a form of protest masculinity not expressed with physical violence: he found a way to punish his wife for not dedicating herself to him. He denied her the chance to carry out her traditional role to counterbalance the unfavourable change in the balance of power. In other words, because Ward’s mother did not recognise her husband’s role as the head of the household, he responded by refusing to acknowledge her role as a wife. However, his response was ineffective because he tried to restore his dominance in a field where his was no longer at the centre of the stage. This man lost his role as provider as well as his place in the social field where he was dominant. At the same time, he did not gain a new place in the new field of action where he lived in displacement. As a result, his gendered habitus remained “suspended” in between. He used protest behaviours to restore and reaffirm his masculinity.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempted to show how Syrian refugee men displaced in Lebanon renegotiated their masculinity in the new social space where their habitus did not synch with the new field. The traditional Syrian society prior the war tended to keep gender roles separated through a strict division of labour, which also reflected on a division of responsibilities. In displacement, gender roles are likely to undergo changes because women and men are forced to act according to different settings. They have newly acquired responsibilities and possibilities, which can be both empowering or disempowering. Many Syrian women displaced in Lebanon entered the job market for the first time. This has had an impact on the social structure because not only they entered the public space through the paid work, but also they maintained their presence in the private space, with their previous role as “caregivers.” On the other hand, when Syrian refugee men lost their position in the public space, and their roles as providers, they did not gain a new space in the private sphere. As a result, they remained suspended between two spaces. Their habitus, which did not recognise familiarity with any of those spaces, also remained “suspended.” A similar crisis would normally be negotiated through reflexivity, but because the conditions were still considered temporary, individuals did not find a way to cope. If Syrian refugees are constantly reminded that they are not, and cannot, become permanent residents of Lebanon, and that they are not welcomed to stay, then the process of adapting to the new conditions surrounding them becomes much harder.

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