**Abstract**

While literature on the Middle East has often been preoccupied with the notion of honour and shame, attention on these topics tends to focus on exceptional examples such as honour killings, and less so on everyday practices of upholding honour, including secrecy. Based on anthropological research with Syrian women and men in Jordan, this article explores everyday, gendered practices of secret-keeping and secret-breaking related to six key topics: future plans, marital conflicts, intimate partner violence, relationships with the opposite sex, financial challenges, and personal needs and problems. This article reveals tensions and contradictions in how people adhere to and challenge gender norms in their practices of secret-keeping and secret-breaking. It highlights how secret-keeping is also not only about satisfying (or being seen as satisfying) a collective norm, but at times secrecy may be motivated by self-interest.

**Keywords:** gender norms, honour, intimate partner violence, Syria

**Introduction**

Within literature on the Middle East context, there is little focus on the topic of secrecy, specifically the politics, relationships and norms underlying the practices of secret-keeping and secret-breaking. Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1985) analysis of social life among Bedouin women in Egypt is a key exception from the region. She focuses on secrets shared between women in the context of their interconnected lives. Alongside her work in expanding thinking on the intimacies women share, a few Arabic sayings point to the importance of secrecy by invoking ideas of shame or embarrassment, such as, ‘Keep the floor covered’ and ‘Don’t hang out your dirty clothes for all to see’. These colloquialisms emphasise that reasons for secrecy may be grounded in honour and shame discourses, which have been a dominant theme in analysis of Middle Eastern societies (Abu-Lughod, 1989, p. 285; Sinclair-Webb, 2000, p. 10).

Keeping secrets is a means of ‘information control’ (Vangelisti and Caughlin, 1997, p. 680). While secrets may be either positive or negative (Imber-Black, 1993), Vangelisti (1994) suggests there is perhaps more emphasis on the negative content and consequences of secrets within literature on secrets. In her own research she suggests that there are three kinds of family secrets – those about taboo topics that carry stigma, those regarding rule violations, and those about conventional secrets which may not necessarily be ‘wrong’ but may be inappropriate. In contrast, disclosing a secret can invoke and sustain intimacy (Bauminger *et al.*, 2008; Policarpo, 2015). Family secrets may increase cohesiveness within the family, creating closeness between those who know the secret (Vangelisti and Caughlin, 1997; Ow and Katz, 1999, p. 625). Conversely, breaking a secret risks disapproval from other family members (Imber-Black, 1993). The rules or norms regulating what is kept private may be linked to culture (Petronio, 2010). For example, breaching family privacy may be perceived as threatening ‘face’ among people from South Korean backgrounds (Cho and Sillars, 2015, p. 536). The fear of shame or stigma and the need to maintain the honour of the family might prevent people from Middle Eastern cultural backgrounds from disclosing mental health issues (Abdullah and Brown, 2011, pp. 943–944).

The notion of honour is particularly important when considering secrets in the Middle East context. Associated with moral codes and modesty, honour often carries gendered connotations, emphasising the need for women in particular to adhere to particular gender norms. Gender norms define ‘acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society’. They are ‘produced and reproduced through social interaction’ (Cislaghi and Heise, 2020, pp. 415–416). Gender norms may influence behaviour, as women and men wish to avoid social punishments for failing to comply with behaviour that is expected of them. However, people find ways to manoeuvre around norms. Scott’s (1990) work on ‘hidden transcripts’ provides insights on differences in behaviour between the ‘offstage’ and public arenas (p. 4). He suggests that those in subordinate positions in society may outwardly act in a way that is expected of them, in accordance with a norm, however may engage in ‘resistance’ behind the scenes. Norms related to honour can be the rationale for keeping certain kinds of secrets, particularly those related to women’s or family honour. Abadeer (2015) writes: ‘In the Arab world… a woman holds in her body, behavior and reputation the honor of the collective community’ (p. 63). Although critiqued as an ‘archaic notion’ (Awwad, 2001, p. 45), the concept of family honour can be a useful way of understanding family politics and power hierarchies. Honour and shame may be ‘a mode of interpretation through which inequalities are created and sustained’ (Lindisfarne, 1994, p. 85), shedding light on family relationships.

Linked to the notion of honour is the priority that may be given to the collective rather than the individual – a factor in many Middle Eastern contexts (Abadeer, 2015). Joseph (1999) uses the concept of ‘relationality’ to describe ‘a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding, and sociability’ (p. 9). Her work suggests that in Arab societies, people are ‘embedded’ within kin relationships and relationships of proximity that influence their sense of self (p. 11). She argues, however, that women’s sense of self emerges differently to men’s and is shaped by gender and age hierarchies that preference men and elders (Joseph, 2005, p. 81). Importantly, these connections are ‘shifting and situational’, meaning that these bonds can be transgressed (Joseph, 1999, p. 11). Within such ‘sociocentric’ systems (Hassan *et al.*, 2015, p. 27), people ‘tend to see themselves in relation to others’ and to a far lesser degree as individuals (Rugh, 1984, p. 35). The sense of self is viewed in a relational way, such that interdependence may be valued over individualism (Javidi and Javidi, 1991, p. 131; Cho and Sillars, 2015, p. 535). This might mean that secrecy is used as a strategy to maintain the honour of the collective. This conceptualisation of relationships has considerable impact on issues of help-seeking – which may be viewed as the breaking of secrecy. In collectivist societies, seeking help may be less acceptable because of the way such behavior may reflect on the broader group (Ow and Katz, 1999, p. 621). Certain issues may be viewed as requiring more secrecy than others. For example, in a study of Israeli Arabs in Jaffa, Savaya (1996) found women were more willing to seek help regarding problems they faced with their children rather than their husbands (p. 35). It may be less acceptable for Arab women to seek protection for violence they experience in the home, because the reputation of the family is more important than their own safety (Haj-Yahia, 2000, p. 240).

The context of forced displacement in the Middle East offers opportunities to understand everyday practices of secrecy. Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, 5.6 million Syrians have fled their homes and been registered as refugees in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. Prior to the start of the conflict, the Syrian government was already an oppressive, authoritarian regime (Meininghaus, 2016, pp. 14–15), using violence and fear to suppress opposition, including imprisoning and killing dissenters. The *mukhābarāt* [intelligence agencies] were (and continue to be) pervasive, conducting activities in the open rather than covertly, which fed into the fear surrounding their surveillance activities (Büchs, 2009, p. 15). Pearlman (2016) argues that this constant environment of fear shaped the lives of Syrians in significant ways; fear was ‘deeply formative of their sense of self and being in the world’ (p. 25). This historical context helps to situate the secret-breaking and secret-keeping experiences of Syrians, specifically during forced displacement. Across the Middle East, the highest proportions of refugees are hosted within Turkey (63%), Lebanon (18%) and Jordan (12%) (*UNHCR*, 2020). In Jordan, there are currently 661,997 registered Syrian refugees. Around 80% of Syrian refugees in Jordan are self-settled, living among Jordanians, Palestinians and other groups rather than within formal refugee camps(*UNHCR*, 2020). Self-settled refugees reside in rented apartments, communal housing or other spaces that have been repurposed to house refugees (Krishnan *et al.*, 2020, p. 7), sometimes sharing housing with extended family members. At the time of data collection, self-settled refugees faced a number of challenges, including high cost for rental properties, using a large proportion of limited earnings for rent, often living in poorly-maintained housing. They faced pressure to pay higher rent or end up moving housing regularly as landlords increase rental costs. Despite the Jordan Compact in 2016, which provided work permits for Syrian refugees in specific sectors, the success in integrating Syrian refugees into the Jordanian labour market has been limited (Lenner and Turner, 2018). Syrian refugees in Jordan face significant barriers to accessing work, resulting in increased economic pressure upon households (Krishnan *et al.*, 2020). Financial stress associated with income loss and high cost of living is often the most significant type of stress faced by Syrian refugees in Jordan (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018). The pressures of displacement as well as previous experiences fleeing armed conflict can result in Syrian refugees facing mental health and psychosocial issues (Hassan *et al.*, 2015; Wells *et al.*, 2016). However, help-seeking for mental health and psychosocial needs among Syrians is often limited due to stigma and normalisation of distress, which may be linked to cultural belief systems (Hassan *et al.*, 2015; Maconick *et al.*, 2020) (Maconick et al., 2020; Hassan et al. 2015). Similarly, Syrian women may downplay their experiences of violence due to fear of bringing shame, stigma or dishonour to their families (Al-Shdayfat, 2017, p. 4; MacTavish, 2020, p. 12)(MacTavish 2020, p. 12; Al-Shdayfat, 2017, p. 4). Disclosure to relatives or friends may create more problems for women, causing them to decide to keep violence as a family secret (Al-Natour, Al-Ostaz and Morris, 2019, p. 35). As well as not trusting service providers and fearing they will be returned to Syria, Syrian women may not seek health or psychosocial services after intimate partner violence due to fear of falling under the mandatory reporting laws for violence cases which operate in Jordan, as this might result in retaliation from a spouse (Daoud, 2020, p. 8).

This article argues that analysing secrecy as an everyday practice among Syrian refugees in Jordan provides important insights into the influence of, and exceptions to gender norms. Within much of the literature on honour and shame within the Middle East, there has been a stronger focus on honour killings and honour-related violence (Ouis, 2009; Abu Odeh, 2010; Standish, 2014), and less so on the everyday and less sensationalist practices of upholding honour, such as telling a lie to prevent someone from losing face, or protecting a family’s honour by not leaving a husband when violence occurs. This gap means that honour – as a manifestation of gender norms – is often framed narrowly. Women and men’s decisions to hide information are not always understood as being linked to the need to maintain honour, for example, decisions to avoid disclosing violence are rarely positioned as strategic (Thomson, 2013). Taking a feminist approach, this article suggests that analysis of secret-keeping and secret-breaking practices provides insights into the challenges women face and the obstacles they navigate. Through the lens of secrecy, new learnings on the strength and limits of norms emerge, highlighting how people negotiate, manoeuvre and challenge hierarchies they are placed within.

**Methods**

This paper is based on anthropological fieldwork that occurred in Jordan from September 2016 to May 2017, as part of doctoral research which focused on exploring humanitarian narratives on gender norms among Syrian refugees, examining (im)mobilities, social relationships, gender and resistance. My research was conducted with self-settled Syrian refugees living in the areas of Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash and Amman. These refugees were aged 18–60 and were largely from Dar’a, Damascus and Homs in Syria. While only a few female and male research participants were university-educated, the majority of all participants had completed at least a few years of high school. Only a fifth of participants were single; the remainder were married. Around a third of female research participants had been employed at one time in Syria. The majority of participants were from middle class backgrounds. At times mirroring living patterns in Syria, my research participants (all adults) tended to live with (or very close to) their parents and in-laws in Jordan, sharing apartments between families. My research methods with Syrian women and men included photography workshops and focus group discussions (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, life story interviews and participant observation. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with humanitarian practitioners. While my doctoral research was based on the methods outlined above, the findings of this paper draw primary on the accounts of six women – three of whom (Eman, Hadiya and Aya) participated in life story interviews and three of whom (Dina, Zubeida and Safa) participated in semi-structured interviews. Each of these six women also participated in the photography workshops and FGDs. This paper also draws on content from FGDs held with women and men and interviews with men.

This research was designed based on feminist research principles, specifically the transnational feminist approach, which is ‘an anti-imperialist, anticapitalist, and contextualized feminist project’ that seeks to ‘expose and make visible the various, overlapping forms of subjugation of women’s lives’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 515). Transnational feminism incorporates an analysis of ‘intersectionality’, paying attention to the intersections between different power hierarchies such as gender, economic status and refugee status (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1282). It places importance on understanding ‘the material conditions that structure women’s lives in diverse locations’ (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, p. 17) Feminist research aims to improve women’s lives and seeks to recognise and address unequal power hierarchies that shape their lives (Letherby, 2003, pp. 4–7).

Conducting a feminist ethnography involved seeking to understand the lives of participants and contextualise their experiences within the broader context of intersecting power hierarchies that may structure their lives (Giampietro, 2008, p. 59; Biehl and Petryna, 2013, p. 12). Feminist research is inductive, emerging from accounts of participants rather than being driven by theory (Letherby, 2003, p. 67). As such, while my research was not focused on secrecy, the accounts of participants during interviews and FGDs about secret-keeping and secret-breaking led to the exploration of this particular topic when data was analysed. Exploring the topic of secrecy became a means of challenging generalisations about honour and shame in Middle Eastern contexts through centring participants’ accounts of everyday secret-keeping and secret-breaking (Biehl and Petryna, 2013, p. 17; Davis and Craven, 2016, p. 99).

Feminist research focuses on acknowledging and addressing unequal power hierarchies which structure all research (Paradis, 2000, p. 840). At the methodological level, the use of certain research methods may reduce power hierarchies between the researcher and participants (Rodgers, 2004). Research methods that are more flexible and participatory can be helpful in conducting feminist research (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 13). Feminist research prioritises relationships with research participants even over the need to gather data (Malkki, 1995, p. 51). For my research, this meant investing in building relationships with participants through sharing food, sharing my own life experiences and stories and listening to the issues that were important to refugees. I sought to give something back to participants (Liamputtong, 2007, p. 60), to engage in ‘reciprocity’ in building friendships and supporting refugees in finding information about benefits or resettlement claims from UN and other humanitarian agencies. In making these connections my positionality (background, experiences and personal characteristics) as a researcher also required reflection

(Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, p. 121). My background as a humanitarian worker, with ethnic origins in [XXXXX] but [XXXX] citizenship, as well as my volunteer work with refugees in [XXXX] affected my perception of refugees as well as their perceptions of me. On multiple occasions during fieldwork, women went out of their way to share information with me that might be usually considered secret. It may be that women felt disclosing to a darker-skinned foreigner was safer, given my temporary status in Jordan, however, at times it was surprising given what the literature says about the need to protect family reputation.

Fieldwork for this research began with photography workshops with Syrian women and men, with FGDs embedded within them. These workshops were held weekly over five or six sessions in Amman (one men’s and one women’s group), Zarqa (two women’s groups) and Irbid (one men’s and one women’s group) – within local organisations in each location who had space available to be used for workshops. My previous work experience as a humanitarian worker in Jordan enabled me to draw on existing networks to identify these local organisations. FGDs were conducted within the workshops with the same groups each week, though attendance varied. Across locations, workshops were attended regularly by thirty-four women and nine men, with several other participants attending sporadically. While the findings of this paper do not draw on the participatory photography activities conducted in the workshop, this paper does draw on FGDs conducted during the workshops. These included discussions between participants about their day-to-day experiences of life in Jordan, compared to life in Syria. FGDs can be a helpful methodology to enable participation and discussion of consensus views, however it is important to note that power dynamics persist during FGDs, which means that certain individuals or dominant perspectives might direct discussions (Smithson, 2000, p. 116).

Following the photography workshops, I conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with fifteen women and five men, as well as ten life story interviews with seven women and three men. Most of these individuals had already participated in the photography workshops, or were friends/relatives of workshop participants. Life stories are distinct from other interview methods in that they require multiple prolonged sessions (Leavy, 2006, p. 154), and may take longer than other kinds of interviews. Life stories provide wider social context to individual experiences (McLeod and Thomson, 2009, p. 41) and ‘may challenge the collective story and its essentializing tendency’ (Eastmond, 2007, p. 253). During life story inteviews across multiple sessions, in homes, cafes and parks, I asked refugees to share their life stories with reference to the following periods in their lives: childhood, adolescence, adulthood, leaving Syria and life in Jordan. I began the discussion by asking: ‘What did it mean to be a girl/boy growing up in Syria? Can you tell me about your childhood?’, and used a similar question structure to invite narratives about later life stages.

Participant observation was conducted within humanitarian organisations where workshops/FGDs were held, and in cafés, homes and public spaces where I met with refugees for interviews. I also conducted ten semi-structured interviews with local and international humanitarian agency staff and consultants who were working, or had worked in Jordan.

The research was conducted with translation support from two research assistants. I had support in transcribing the exact words of participants from interview recordings into English. The data was analysed and coded using *Nvivo*. All names of participants appearing in this paper are pseudonyms. As stated earlier, although my research did not specifically focus on secrecy, this topic emerged in the narratives of participants – particularly women – during interviews and FGDs. To explore accounts of secret-keeping and secret-breaking, I used *Nvivo* to re-analyse my transcripts and identify narratives about secrets. Given the limited literature on secrets from Middle East contexts, I expanded my literature search to include practices of secret-keeping and secret-breaking from other geographical regions as well as other disciplines, such as psychology and cultural studies.

**Findings**

The ethnographic accounts of Syrian refugees reveal that secret-keeping is at times positioned as necessary. In interviews, Syrian women and men shared stories of secrets they kept from family and friends. One woman said, it was important as a woman to ‘always make your tongue short, don’t get it out, the secrets of the house’. Another shared a common proverb: ‘Keep it in your heart and let it injure you, better than letting it out of your heart and disgrace you’ – alluding to this idea of shame being linked to disclosing secrets. A Syrian idiom shared by two young women during interviews, loosely translated means that it is better to have ten sons-in-law rather than one daughter-in-law because the daughter-in-law will not keep the secrets of the house. This idiom emphasises that secrets be kept within the family and that a daughter-in-law is not part of the family, remaining an outsider to some extent.

The following ethnographic examples demonstrate the everyday, gendered secret-keeping and secret-breaking practices of Syrian women and men. They primarily draw on the experiences of six Syrian women: Dina, Zubeida, Hadiya, Aya, Eman and Safa. A few experiences of other female and male FGD and interview participants are also included. The accounts in this section outline six key topics which people kept secrets about: future plans, marital conflicts, intimate partner violence, relationships with the opposite sex, financial challenges, and personal needs and problems. Across each type of secret, the tensions and contradictions between maintaining loyalty to the collective and protecting self-image are discussed. This includes exploring the context, including gender norms, leading to secret-keeping and secret-breaking, and the individuals or groups secrets are kept from or revealed to.

*Future plans*

In my research, many refugees discussed their plans for the future, including their hopes for resettlement and their desire to return to Syria. The topic of future plans resulted in secret-keeping by one participant in particular. Dina, a young Syrian woman in her mid-20s, explained how she hides information from her parents, who live next-door to her in Jordan. Her husband was in Europe, having journeyed there by sea with one of their sons. For months, she had been trying to be reunified with her husband, going through the difficult process of proving their relationship through providing documentation to the European embassy. She found out that her initial application was unsuccessful, however decided not to tell her parents that the application had failed. Keeping this information private was a strategic decision informed by family politics.

When Dina had married her husband (who was also her cousin), she had to move to another governorate, leaving her natal family behind. She described how her husband had conflicts with her parents while in Syria: ‘[M]y husband was at odds with them’. In Jordan, Dina ended up living next-door to her parents and the relationship she had with them prior to marriage somewhat returned: ‘[T]hings are back to normal as if I was back living with them. My food is their food, their food is my food’. Her parents would often care for her small children, who were sometimes disobedient. Dina felt her parents were more accepting of her children’s behaviours because her parents believed she would soon be moving to Europe with her children. When the future plans for her family failed, Dina chose to keep this news to herself, worrying that her parents would now judge her for the bad behaviour of her children without the assurance that she and her children would soon be leaving the country. Her decision was strategic, because she may need their support with caregiving while she tries to re-apply for reunification.

*Marital conflicts*

The topic of marital conflicts demonstrates the contradictions and tensions in when secrets are kept and when they are broken. For example, Zubeida, who at age 60 holds the role of matriarch in her family, shared this conflict resolution advice when dealing with angry husbands: ‘Let him be and you stay quiet… *Ya*ʿ*nī* [it means], she shouldn’t say anything at all to her husband’. She added, ‘She should make sure his trouser is ironed and neat, so, not to give him any excuse…’ She seemed to see a woman’s role as linked to meeting her husband’s desires (Joseph, 2005).

This advice seems to clash with what Hadiya, a university-educated woman in her mid-30s, described when asked about the best way to deal with a husband. She emphasised honesty, saying, ‘[T]alk to each other and tell him everything, in the way it happened’. She said she doesn’t hide anything from her husband, but they figure out issues between themselves: ‘The argument stays just between us. But in front of... *ya*ʿ*nī*, other people, we are normal.’ This latter comment reflects that disclosing to anyone outside of the husband and wife relationship should be avoided; some things should remain in the ‘private’ space of the marital relationship.

During fieldwork, accounts of intimate partner violence, arguments with spouses, conflicts with family members and disagreements with friends were described to me – an outsider. At other occasions, information that ought to have perhaps been only communicated to a family member or a close friend was revealed among groups of women. During one FGD, a woman said loudly, ‘I hate my husband’ in front of the whole group. During another FGD, when one woman was describing her husband’s chronic illness, another woman interrupted and said, ‘I wish my husband had a disease’. These unexpected disclosures also seemed to challenge expected norms about keeping marital problems within the family.

*Intimate partner violence*

Secret-keeping to avoid the judgment of others may be a particularly important strategy in cases of intimate partner violence. The accounts of a young woman in her early 20s named Aya illustrate the complexities associated with women’s decisions to endure violence. In Syria, Aya was engaged to a man her family had chosen for her, however during her engagement she fell in love with another man and broke off the engagement in order to marry the man she loved. She said, ‘I loved him and so I took him!’ However, shortly after marriage, the dynamic between Aya and her new husband changed. As conflict between Aya and her husband escalated, Aya began to experience physical and emotional violence. In Jordan, her mother lives a few minutes walk from her home, and regularly visited, but Aya chose to put on a brave front. She feared telling her mother about her marriage problems, because it was her decision to marry her husband, instead of the person her mother had wanted for her. She feared her mother would scold her, saying, ‘You chose’.

Eman, a woman in her early 30s, also keeps secrets related to intimate partner violence to avoid her family’s judgments. However, the judgment she avoids does not only relate to her, but to her husband. Her husband, who is also her cousin, is often unwell and takes out his frustrations on Eman using violence. On more than one occasion, this violence was quite severe. Prior to marriage, Eman’s family and her husband’s family lived close to each other in the same village in Syria; their lives were always connected. In Jordan, Eman lives in a large government building that houses refugees from different countries. Eman’s brothers and sister live nearby, however Eman is careful to avoid telling her brothers about her difficulties with her husband because they have previously fought violently with her husband to defend her. On one occasion in Jordan when her husband beat her particularly badly, her younger brother saw the belt marks left on her face and back and ‘went crazy’, taking her to their older brother, which made her afraid: ‘I know once this reaches my older brother, it will be over with my husband’. When her older brother saw how injured she was, he wanted her to go to the Family Protection Department (Jordanian government department) to make a complaint, but she refused, saying she would go back to her husband. In this example, the need to keep matters within the family that is sometimes emphasised in analysis on honour, seemed to be less important because of the severity of her injuries, as well as perhaps the negative relationship between Eman’s brothers and her husband. Eman refused to take action against her husband and was blamed by her brothers for having a ‘weak personality’. This has become a regular criticism she faces. She said, ‘They tell me I am the one who allowed him to stay this way’. The situation is more complicated however, as Joseph (1994) comments, Eman is ‘structurally caught between competing loyalties... torn between families of origin and of procreation’ (p. 57). While some research may suggest that love between siblings is more powerful than between spouses (Abdallah, 2009, p. 50), the ties to a husband can still be powerful. Importantly, Eman’s actions may reflect on her brothers, whose status is connected to Eman’s (Joseph, 1994, p. 56). What Joseph calls ‘mutual involvement with each other’ is part of the conceptualisation of the brother-sister dynamic being linked to connectivity, love and power (p. 55). Her actions reflect on her family and are part of the mutual connectivity between her and her natal family that may be sustained even during marriage.

The connection to her family also affects Eman’s ability to find a safe space when she faces violence. Eman explained how it may be acceptable for a woman to return to her family’s house if she has a disagreement with her spouse: ‘When women become upset with their husbands and leave their homes, the only place they can go back to is the family's home’. However, she added, ‘[I]n Syrian culture it is considered of shame for a woman to leave her husband’s house’. This shame on the woman occurs ‘because she was disrespected from her husband and/or because of the gossip that will rise in the neighbourhood as a result of the wife leaving the house’. To avoid this, when these incidents of violence occur, she leaves, but does not disclose to others that her visit is due to fleeing violence. She said, ‘[W]e would keep the real reason between us’ and she would only say she was there for a ‘visit’.

Eman’s decisions about who she discloses violence to also reveals tensions in who can be trusted with secrets. Eman initially only avoided telling her brothers about violence, fearing they would take action, but now avoids her sister as well: ‘[I]f I for instance tell my sister about something, it's a problem because she goes and tells them. That's why there is disagreement between us; between them and my husband…’ However, Eman’s new approach somewhat contradicts the expected norm of keeping things within the family. She added, ‘I stopped telling her [my sister] and told my neighbours instead’. In the building where Eman lives, in contrast to her quiet village in Syria where everyone knew each other, she has found new connections with other refugees and now tells them far more than she tells her family members.

*Relationships with the opposite sex*

Relationships with the opposite sex also emerged as a topic that was kept secret. Safa, a young, single woman who lived in a busy city before the conflict, described how she had male friends in Syria in her early teen years, before leaving Syria. She said: ‘Many people were shocked, saying this thing is not ok. According to our customs, we don't have that, that a girl has guy friends. So, my family started to say, “Don't talk about it in front of those people, that you have these friends”’. Safa’s parents didn’t mind that she had male friends, but they felt others would mind and instructed her to avoid mentioning her male friends. Safa’s secret-keeping was strongly linked to maintaining gender norms that suggest women should have a certain reputation and maintain the ‘honour’ of their family through their behaviour. Safa’s parents had the power to stop the behaviour but chose instead to tell her hide it from others. The fear of what others would think about a gender norm being resisted, caused them to instruct Safa to take steps to preserve the image of the family, and perhaps even their reputation as parents.

In Jordan, when Safa became engaged, her fiancé́ would visit her at her house. Safa’s family members would leave the two of them to talk, but would come in every ten or fifteen minutes. Safa laughed cheekily, saying, ‘[W]e made the best of that time’. In this example, her parents’ attitude before the war extended to the period of displacement of Jordan. They did not automatically tighten the restrictions on their unmarried daughter because of displacement, but once even allowed Safa and her fiancé́ to have lunch and shop in Amman by themselves. Here, resistance occurred with the knowledge of Safa’s family, also disrupting the idea that challenging a gender norm by implication involves conflict within the family (Johnson and Joseph, 2009, p. 2). Safa explained that her family were ‘open-minded’ – tracing this openness to her mother’s side of the family, not her father’s (itself interesting as it indicates the mother’s upbringing was more persuasive). She said this openness was due to their education and the fact that they lived in a city; while her father’s family lived in the countryside. She added, ‘[T]they are not naturally strict like some people. They keep the traditions and customs. But still, they move with the times’.

Safa’s navigating of relationships with the opposite sex were similar to Zubeida’s actions when she was engaged decades earlier. Zubeida was engaged to be married as a teenager. She was not allowed to see her fiancé alone, however because they were in love, the couple found ways to meet. In Zubeida’s case, the meetings occurred without knowledge of her parents. Zubeida used her fiancé’s love for her to make him agree to secret meetings, circumventing the norms they were expected to meet.

*Financial challenges*

During interviews, women discussed how financial challenges were kept secret; asking for help to resolve financial problems was seen as something unacceptable by participants. An Arabic saying, ‘Complaining to someone other than God is disgrace’ suggests that complaining is viewed negatively. For Eman, whose husband is regularly sick and finds it difficult to work, getting financial help therefore needs to happen secretly. In the close quarters of the government building she lives in, Eman has managed to secretly find extra food for her family. At night, she explained, people living in the building hang bags of bread that they do not need on the staircase. When it is dark, Eman creeps out to the staircase to take this bread. She has never mentioned this to her husband and he has never asked where the bread comes from. By keeping the secret, Eman is protected from the shame of admitting where the bread comes from, and her husband is protected from the shame of knowing that he has not been able to earn money and provide food for the family.

These unspoken issues provide protection within collectivist societies that may require certain gender roles to be upheld. For example, Hadiya explained how she lives with her parents, husband and her children in a small apartment in Amman. This represents a change from her life in Syria, where she and her husband lived in a separate house to her parents and she ran her own business. In Jordan, she and her husband struggle financially but she has not mentioned this to her parents directly. While these challenges remain unspoken, it seems her parents recognized that their daughter faced financial challenges. Once, they took her children out and bought them clothes without asking. For Hadiya, this saved her the embarrassment of directly admitting to needing this help. The discreet acts of her parents helped Hadiya and her husband to save face.

Aya’s experiences demonstrate how she manages the shame that is associated with asking for financial help. Aya’s husband finds it difficult to obtain work in Jordan, which is linked to the fear that working illegally will result in deportation – a common fear among Syrian men. Her difficult financial situation means that she requires help from others, including her mother, merely to ensure the survival of her family: ‘I told her, “Mother I want to have breakfast with my youngest brother. Mother give me a JD [Jordanian currency, equivalent to 1 GBP]!” She went on to explain: ‘[A] woman's *nafs* [psychological status] is hurt when she must ask something from someone… *Ya*ʿ*nī*, when a woman has money she doesn't need to ask for help from this person and that person. *Ya*ʿ*nī*, honestly what good will it do me to ask someone I didn't know for milk?... I considered myself I became a beggar!’ Although her husband limits her movements outside the home, Aya works around this in order to earn money: ‘I have to go and work in people’s homes... But behind my husband’s back’. She keeps this secret work to herself to avoid the negative consequences that may result from her husband finding out that she is leaving the home when she is not supposed to. It is also possible that she keeps this work from her husband to avoid conflict that may result from the fact that she is able to find work, while he is unable to.

The issue of work has also become quite sensitive because of Aya’s husband’s parents (her in-laws) who criticise their son for his inability to obtain work. When they visit his parents, according to Aya, his parents immediately ‘guilt trip’ him about eating the food they have provided. His father says things like, ‘I give him to drink, I feed him and he is asleep!’ Aya shared her discomfort that these criticisms were being levelled at her husband and in front of her. Once her father-in-law said to her, ‘What’s left for you to do is to get a diaper for him and help him wear it’. This comment was directed at Aya, but it may be this language was also intended to emasculate his son; using shame to criticise him in front of his wife for not fulfilling the gender norm that he provide for his family. The awkwardness Aya felt about her parents-in-law commenting on this in her presence is also significant as it illustrates how a more public criticism can cause more damage. Scott (1990) writes: ‘[A]ny indignity is compounded greatly when it is inflicted in public. An insult, a look of contempt, a physical humiliation, an assault on one’s character and standing, a rudeness is nearly always far more injurious when it is inflicted before an audience’ (p. 113). The humiliation experienced by her husband may explain his behaviour towards Aya, specifically an occasion where he beat her in front of his parents for answering back to him. This may have been a way for him to reclaim power that was lost through the many times his parents criticised him in front of his wife, as well as an opportunity for him to show his parents that if nothing else, he could manage his wife.

*Personal needs and problems*

Personal problems may also be kept secret, especially for men. For men, being dependent on others for general help (as opposed to financial help) may be particularly difficult. In an interview, one older man said, ‘For us, we feel embarrassed to ask for help. It is very difficult for us to ask for this… Even now we get loans from friends, but we cannot ask for help. We are not used to ask[ing] for help’.

The barriers preventing men in particular from asking for assistance or communicating their needs are not as simple as hiding information from friends while disclosing problems to the family. In an FGD, while talking about his family, another man said, ‘I do not show them [my family] the problems which happened outside the house for not worrying them more. It is from myself’. This man felt that he couldn’t speak about the problems he faced - even to his own family. This is particularly striking because it seems to signify a pressure beyond just providing for the family (a common narrative), but reflects the need for men to present a stoic front. Men’s tendency to preserve a strong front is also known by women. In an FGD, one woman said, ‘If the man looks like this [making an expectant facial expression], you should understand that he needs something. He either wants water, or he wants something but is embarrassed to tell you’. As the wife, she felt she needed to decipher these unspoken signals from her husband, to preserve him from the apparent indignity of needing to ask, aligning with Joseph’s (2005) analysis that women are expected to interpret the desires of others (p. 85).

Women may also face pressures to maintain a strong front when communicating with their family members. Similar to Eman, who in Jordan has recognised the challenges in communicating sensitive information to family members, Zubeida said that doesn’t trust her relatives with her problems or emotions because she felt they would talk behind her back. Instead, she would confide in a close Syrian friend, both before and during displacement, explaining, ‘I love my sister but I tell my friend more than I tell my sister’.

**Discussion**

This paper highlights the types of everyday secrets that are kept and broken, highlighting how gender norms about family honour and reputation may result in decisions to hide information, among both women and men. It draws on the accounts of Syrian refugees in Jordan to explore the tensions and contradictions in how secrets are kept, in adherence to collectivist ideologies and gender norms, but also suggests there may be opportunities for secret-breaking in certain circumstances. The findings of this paper demonstrate that secret-keeping and secret-breaking are not necessarily practices solely linked to displacement. While some of the issues linked to secrets (such as future plans, financial challenges, asking for help) may have emerged due to displacement, the practices of secret-keeping and secret-breaking themselves reflect broader social and gender norms and family politics.

The decisions of Eman and Aya to hide intimate partner violence affirm dominant honour narratives that the success or failure of marriage does not only reflect on women, but reflects back onto their families (Haj-Yahia, 2000, p. 239; Al-Krenawi *et al.*, 2004, p. 108). The notion that actions reflect back onto the family also applies to Safa and Zubeida, women aged decades apart, whose friendships with males could lead to their parents being perceived negatively. However, the fact that their actions could bring shame to themselves and their families did not prevent Eman, Safa and Zubeida from making their own decisions. Eman chose to return to her family’s home to flee violence, enabling the preservation of both her and her family’s reputation and honour. Safa, instead of being told to end her friendships with males, was encouraged to hide these relationships from others, both prior to and during displacement. Zubeida, in contrast to Safa, herself navigated around norms for expected behaviour, to secretly meet her fiancé in private. These examples of information management on the topics of intimate partner violence and male-female segregation, demonstrate Scott’s (1990) notion that ‘resistance’ can occur outside of the public view (p. 4). This framing of seen versus unseen behaviours is helpful in thinking about secrets, as it suggests that secret-keeping may be strategic, to preserve at least the appearance of a power hierarchy being maintained.

Thinking about secret-keeping as strategic also highlights that the automatic linkage between a woman’s actions and her family’s reputation or honour may be less fixed than usually depicted in literature on the Middle East. Norms are often given particular weight in collectivist societies: ‘Collectivists are more likely to be under normative control, in which their actions align with cultural assumptions’ (Abadeer, 2015, p. 87). However, the emphasis on this collective nature of society may make it appear as if norms are immovable. The desire to preserve honour still exists, however there are ways to maneuver around it, both before and during displacement. The findings of this paper suggest that families themselves may be less concerned with the acts leading to dishonour itself, as they are about the *perception* of these acts. They may even be willing to engage in subterfuge to manage perceptions.

However, this article highlights that even in collectivist societies, decision-making about secrets is not always straight-forward. In the examples of Aya and Eman hiding intimate partner violence from family members, and Dina hiding the news of her failed reunification application, there is also a degree of self-interest, or individualistic thinking, behind the decisions. This secret-keeping, according to Ow & Katz (1999) is based on ‘mutual protection’. In the case of Aya, this is not solely about protecting the reputation or secrets of the family; secrecy goes further and also protects Aya from criticism about the choice she made in marrying the person she loved instead of doing what her family wanted. For Eman, hiding violence from her brothers protects her husband from them, reaffirming his position as male patriarch, but her secret-keeping also protects her from their ongoing criticisms on her inability to take action. The example from Dina perhaps even more strongly reflects self-protective behavior. When Dina has to re-apply for reunification and seek other means of supporting her family, she will need her family’s support in caregiving and perhaps even to meet her financial needs in Jordan. This reaffirms her position in society as a young woman who needs economic support from her elders. Asking for help and being dependent on others has unique implications in situations of forced displacement.

As well as highlighting how perception management and mutual protection lead to secret-keeping, this article shows that secrets may also be broken in certain situations, creating opportunities for help to be received from others. How do we interpret these acts of disclosure made by members of collectivist groups? Bok (1982) suggests that deliberately revealing secrets may be interpreted as an act of separation from the group. In Zubeida’s case, this may be the case given her strong feelings about relatives who she feels have betrayed her as well as the commonalities of nationality she shares with her friend (Herzfeld, 2005). In the case of Eman disclosing intimate partner violence to her new neighbours, it may be a case of needing to share the secret with anyone other than family members, since they have not been trustworthy. While for Eman, the shift in how she shared information occurred during displacement, Zubeida disclosed issues to one particular friend in Syria before the conflict as well. It is therefore not necessarily that displacement has affected practices of secret-keeping; in Eman’s case it may be a consequence of wider exposure to other people, compared to in Syria where she was exposed to fewer people in her small village. In these examples, the motivation for secret-breaking may be multi-layered, linked to the recipient of the secret as well as perhaps the need to find intimacy in relationships. Perhaps the pressure of dealing with difficult situations may eventually build to a degree where a public statement like ‘I hate my husband’ is the only option. It may also be that among groups of women, there exist norms around maintaining confidences that result in women sharing their feelings more readily (Abu-Lughod, 1985). Among men, or even between a husband and wife, it may be more difficult for a man to express the need for help. The example of Aya’s in-laws humiliating her husband highlights also that there are limits to how masculinities are constructed. Mocking their son and challenging his masculinity demonstrates an extreme way of criticising someone – an approach that sits somewhat at odds with needing to preserve the image of a family, or even Syrian sayings that suggest a daughter-in-law should not be privy to certain things as she is not part of the family. It is unclear the extent to which Aya as daughter-in-law is viewed as ‘inside’ the family. This example may illustrate the extreme effects of *not* disclosing that leads to the pressure eventually being too much. Conventions about how information should not be shared may be breached if the situation has escalated to a certain point such that more public secret-breaking occurs. There are thus limits to the extent to which norms will be upheld.

**Conclusion**

This paper contributes to an understanding of everyday practices of secrecy among Syrian refugees. It contextualises the decisions of individuals within collectivist societies that value honour and reputation, drawing attention to the complex layers underpinning secret-keeping and secret-breaking, including social and gender norms and family politics. The gender norms discussed in this paper also apply to men, who may feel reticent about seeking help – a norm not necessarily solely constrained to displacement. This paper suggests that gender norms may be transgressed in multiple ways, including implicitly. It shows that families may construct fabrications in order to create the appearance of adherence to a gender norm, rather than actually adhering. This suggests there may be opportunities for norms to be transgressed even on issues viewed as deeply linked to gender norms, such as seeking help after intimate partner violence, or segregation between males and females.

The examples highlighted in this paper also emphasise that adherence to a gender norm may not solely be driven by a desire to comply to gendered expectations or avoid shame, but may be mixed with self-interest. Indeed, overly fixating on norms to the exclusion of other factors that drive behaviour may result in a narrow analysis of the situation as well as narrowly-framed interventions to address the problem (Cislaghi and Heise, 2019). This finding thus points to different avenues for exploring how change might occur, and how even women’s decisions to disclose intimate partner violence may be more strategic (Thomson, 2013).

Lastly, this paper highlights exceptions where secrets may be disclosed to people perceived as more trustworthy, or even in extreme cases as a means of humiliating others. The more public revealing of secrets may be a reaction to a longer period of having to keep a secret. The pressure may lead to a disclosure in a setting normally seen as inappropriate. This has particular implications when thinking about issues like ongoing intimate partner violence. More research is needed on how the pressure of ongoing violence might lead to situations where women may unexpectedly disclose violence, in settings where it is less expected. This has particular implications for those receiving these disclosures, particular if this occurs in a less private setting.

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