

Unravelling Humanitarian Narratives: Gender Norm Change during Displacement?

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Abstract

International humanitarian actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations agencies, often focus on gender norm change when conducting gender analysis among refugees and internally displaced persons. Dominant humanitarian narratives about gender in research reports, assessments and technical guidance reveal an underlying belief that displacement is causative – an external, intervening force. In such analysis, colonial and neoliberal ideologies may influence how refugees' lives are represented, resulting in depictions of lack of modernity, tradition and culture as overarching (yet ill-defined) forces, and women and girls as vulnerable by default. Such analysis is frequently ahistorical, presented without analysis of the pre-displacement situation. This paper explores and challenges humanitarian narratives about gender norm change during displacement. It is based on feminist ethnographic research in Jordan with Syrian women and men as well as interviews with humanitarian workers. The paper demonstrates that assumptions about lack of empowerment of Syrian women and men may be misguided, identifying both subtle and more overt forms of Syrian women's and men's resistance' to expected norms. It urges humanitarian actors to use 'resistance' as an alternative to analysing 'change', recognise heterogeneity within populations, resist 'rapid' data collection, challenge paternalistic and colonial stereotypes, and reflect complexity in analysis.

Keywords: gender; refugee; displacement; Syria; empowerment

Introduction

With the increased focus on gender across the humanitarian sector, gender analysis has become more important to humanitarian actors, including international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies and local NGOs. Promoting 'gender equality and women's empowerment' often motivates humanitarian actors, however there is no consensus on what this concept means or how it is measured (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015: 399–400), laying shaky ground for how the lives of refugees and internally displaced populations (IDPs) are depicted in gender analysis.

Through gender analysis, narratives about refugees and IDPs become institutionalised. Gender analysis narratives in this paper appear primarily in 'grey' literature originating from humanitarian actors, including research reports, assessments, baselines, evaluations and technical guidance. In this paper, 'dominant'

narratives are the primary account from international humanitarian actors, drawing on Liisa Malkki's (1996) assertion that humanitarian representations of refugees' lives may 'produc[e] anonymous corporeality and speechlessness' (389). The narratives discussed in this paper are from 'international' humanitarian actors, recognising their role in influencing policy and their positions of power over 'local' humanitarian actors (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019; Pincock *et al.*, 2020). In this paper, dominant humanitarian narratives about gender and displacement are challenged through empirical research that explores the problems with 'change' narratives about displacement. The paper examines how colonial and neoliberal imperatives influence dominant gender narratives about refugees and IDPs.

Within analysis of gender and displacement among scholars and humanitarian actors, the concept of 'change' is a common lens used to understand refugees' lives. Academic literature suggests displacement creates



‘a fresh backdrop’ for social change (Kaiser, 2008: 376), particularly gendered changes (Krulfeld, 1994; Nolin, 2006). However, scholars also emphasise that gendered changes may not only occur due to displacement, but may be a continuation of changes already in process (Utas, 2005: 426; Grabska, 2014: 81). For example, in the Middle East, gendered changes have been linked to education, urbanisation, industrialisation, legal protections and changes in family structures (Moghadam, 2003: 25). It is not necessarily displacement itself that causes change; contestations about gender may already be occurring.

Scholars have critiqued descriptions of gendered changes during displacement that emphasise the need for modernity. Humanitarian actors have been critiqued as colonial for using European modernity as the stance from which the lives of ‘others’ are analysed (Peace Direct, 2021). Such colonial representations may be present through dominant narratives about gender. For example, a UNHCR Handbook (2008) on the protection of women and girls describes their urban living conditions as ‘squalid’ and describes women and girls as ‘virtually imprisoned indoors’ due to fear of authorities or the ‘wrath’ of males (9). This dramatic, geographically non-specific description calls to mind Chandra Mohanty’s (1988) critique about how an ‘average third-world woman’ is depicted as leading ‘an essentially truncated life’ involving being ‘sexually constrained’, ‘tradition-bound’ and ‘domesticated’ (65). Such narrow assumptions are part of what Jennifer Fluri (2012) suggests is an interest in the ‘dark side’ of people’s experiences (45). For example, in the context of the so-called ‘European Refugee Crisis’, UN Women (2015a) describes the ‘general profile’ of women refugees entering Macedonia and Serbia, as ‘[t]ired, dirty and traumatized... [with] limited or no knowledge of English’ (4). Trauma is positioned as an automatic condition of refugee-ness, and lack of ability to speak English is assumed, irrespective of nationality or education level. In humanitarian analysis, across multiple humanitarian settings, tradition and culture are often judged as negative forces without further explanation. For example, in Bangladesh, ‘traditional social norms’ are said to explain Rohingya women’s limited mobility and men’s role as income earners (Gerhardt *et al.*, 2020: 7), without explanation of these norms. Among refugees in Tigray, despite research participants citing lack of money and limited availability of services as reasons for not accessing sexual and reproductive health services, tradition and religion are listed as barriers (Habte and Afework, 2021: 20). Assumptions about gendered vulnerability also invoke fixed representations of ‘third-world’ women. For example, in diverse contexts such as Bangladesh and Yemen, being within a female-headed household is enough

to render households vulnerable and at risk of exploitation (Oxfam, 2018: 17; Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2015: 5). Such assumptions neglect contextual differences in household structures and care models, suggesting women are less able to lead households. The vulnerability of refugee women ‘is often simply accepted as a fact that requires no justification or analysis’ (CARE and Promundo, 2017: 14).

In these accounts, the situation before displacement is often not sufficiently explored. Fixating on ‘change’ during displacement means there is less historical, contextualised analysis of power hierarchies influencing gender norms. Instead, studies present gender issues as *caused* by displacement, pathologising the state of refugeeness and presenting refugee settings as ‘sites of social and moral decay’ (Turner, 2017: 45). This results in over-simplifications of complex power relations while producing generalised, orientalist tropes about men’s violence and women’s vulnerability (Mertens and Myrntinen, 2019; Buffon and Allison, 2016). Such analyses often echo racial and colonial judgements about populations (Olivius, 2016: 60; Al-Ali, 2016: 3).

The argument that displacement is not always causative does not mean that refugees’ lives are not affected by conflict and displacement, which undoubtedly are disruptive forces with long-term impacts for refugees. This paper takes a different focus, shifting from assuming causation to raising questions about the assumptions made by humanitarian actors about the types and nature of gender norm change during displacement. The paper suggests that assumptions about refugees may guide humanitarian actors in the urgency of the humanitarian response (Smith, 2019). For example, ‘rapid assessments’ designed according to a pre-determined list of expected issues may serve as an alternative to gender analysis. Isadora Quay (2019) suggests humanitarian actors often prefer to collect primary data through such assessments instead of relying on existing secondary data, which she argues reinforces the limited understanding of gender roles and relations especially prior to conflict. Ideas about expected refugee behaviours during displacement may stem from biases held by humanitarian actors about refugees’ lives (Comes, 2016). In the urgency of the humanitarian response, narratives about refugees may thus reflect an ‘orientalist edge’ that reinforces racial and gender stereotypes (Turner, 2017: 49).

As well as resulting in colonial narratives, quick gender analysis may invoke neoliberal narratives (Mertens and Myrntinen, 2019; Switzer, 2013; Chant, 2016; Rosamond and Gregoratti, 2020). While the narrative that gendered changes have worsened refugees’ lives makes the case for increased investment, positioning displacement as an opportunity for change also positions humanitarian actors as the solution: ‘Crises

can be transformative with respect to empowering women by giving them a voice and role that was previously denied or traditionally dominated by men' (CARE, 2016: 42). Women are not only 'victims' vulnerable to GBV, early marriage and exploitation, they become 'heroines' (Cornwall *et al.*, 2007: 3) when 'empowered' (by humanitarian actors) (Cornwall, 2014: 131). A CARE (2018) report on women and girls in emergencies states: 'Women and girls are at the heart of the transition from crisis to stability.... Investment in women's empowerment ... can provide families with sustainable sources of income and livelihoods' (18). Empowering women and girls often remains central to actions needed to tackle gender inequality (Inter-sector Coordination Group, 2018; UNHCR, CARE and ActionAid, 2020), as if disempowerment is the norm. Such narratives are linked to what Fluri (2012) calls the 'bargain with capitalism', which assumes that economic empowerment will increase women's agency and voice (38).

Based on ethnographic data (outlined below) from Syrian refugees in Jordan as well as interviews with local and international humanitarian practitioners, this paper grapples with the problems associated with fixating on 'change' during displacement. It explores the colonial and neoliberal influences of such narratives. It proposes 'resistance' as an alternative way of analysing gender and shifts the focus from displacement to provide insights about gender norms prior to conflict.

Gender Narratives within the Syria Crisis

The Syria Crisis has often been positioned as a site for changed gender norms. The Syria Crisis began in 2011 as protests were violently suppressed by the Assad regime. To date, close to 7 million Syrians have fled to surrounding countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. At March 2022, Jordan hosts over 673,000 registered refugees alongside a further estimated 600,000 who remain unregistered (UNHCR, 2022; Carrion, 2015). Around 80 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan are 'self-settled' and live in rented apartments, informal settlements and shared accommodation outside of refugee camps (UNHCR, 2022). Despite efforts by the humanitarian sector and the Jordanian government to integrate Syrian refugees into formal work, access to work permits remains limited to specific sectors (Lenner and Turner, 2018), increasing financial pressure which is intensified by high living costs (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018).

Within humanitarian discourses about Syrian refugees and gender, displacement is positioned as a cause of gendered inequalities. The dominant humanitarian narrative is that men are unable to work, therefore feel they are not fulfilling their traditional roles, which causes them to use violence (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016: 5; UNFPA, 2019: 27; World Vision, 2020: 9). Similar to

the issues identified earlier at the global level, within the Syria response, patriarchal norms are often referenced without discussion of pre-displacement norms (UNFPA, 2019: 18; CARE, 2020: 8). For example, humanitarian actors, such as Oxfam, UNICEF, World Vision, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee all describe child marriage as a form of GBV made more frequent as a result of displacement (Oxfam and ABAAD, 2013; UNICEF, 2014: 9; World Vision International, 2020: 3; Save the Children, 2014: 1; International Rescue Committee, 2012: 6). Child marriage is framed within 'a fundamental breakdown of entire communities' (World Vision International, 2020: 3), with the father as harmful decision-maker who determines his daughter's early marriage (UNICEF, 2014: 9). In these narratives, intersectional power hierarchies are not analysed, rather displacement is positioned as an external, intervening stressor.

While some agencies like Oxfam and ABAAD (2013) acknowledge that shifts in roles are complex, others make stronger claims about gender roles being 'reversed' (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016: 4). Women's roles are described as changing from reproductive work before the conflict to productive work (World Vision, 2020), with the assumption that men were the 'sole providers' (Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration, 2015: 13). Refugees are presented as disempowered by default, and shift to being 'empowered' through being 'trained', having their 'awareness' increased, or accessing assets and opportunities (International Rescue Committee, 2014: 29; Save the Children, 2014: 10–11; UNHCR, 2017: 62).

While much humanitarian gender analysis on the Syria Crisis uses the concept of 'change' to describe impacts of displacement, 'change' can be difficult and 'elusive' (Baines, 2010: 2) resulting in homogenous descriptions of refugees' lives prior to displacement. Instead, this paper uses the concept of 'resistance'. Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) argues resistance should be viewed as a 'diagnostic' of power (42), drawing on Michel Foucault's (1978) assertion that '[w]here there is power, there is resistance' (95). Resistance can 'bring to light power relations' (Foucault, 1982: 780). This approach of exploring resistance points more clearly to power, while in contrast, exploring 'change' means power analysis may be bypassed and common assumptions may be reinforced. James Scott's (1990) work also enables a more nuanced approach to understanding the power dynamics between 'overt collective defiance' and 'hegemonic compliance' (136). His analysis of 'hidden transcripts' and 'offstage' resistance reframes conversations about 'change'. Taking this approach might mean that instead of black and white determinations, boundaries may be stretched without breaking (Droeber, 2005: 306). Using the concept of resistance recognises that in the Middle East, the 'public transcript' about gender norms can

over-emphasise men's dominance, 'pigeonholing' men as 'static subjects' (Inhorn, 2012: 45). Instead, this paper seeks to avoid 'harmful caricatures' that negate the idea of masculinities and femininities as 'dynamic social practice [s]' (Inhorn, 2012: 31–46).

Method

The findings in this paper are based on feminist ethnographic research (Letherby, 2003; Giampietro, 2008) in Jordan. The research focused on humanitarian narratives related to gender norms, family relationships, mobility and resistance. In this paper, the findings on resistance are presented. The research was conducted with self-settled Syrian women and men aged 18–60 who live in the Jordanian cities of Amman, Irbid, Zarqa and Jerash as well as humanitarian practitioners.

The research was conducted from a feminist perspective to tackle unequal power hierarchies that can often be present within refugee research (Malkki, 1995: 51). A feminist perspective was used to understand and contextualise the experiences of participants within intersecting power hierarchies (Giampietro, 2008: 59). Feminist research challenges the notion that research is 'neutral' and instead positions knowledge production as subjective (Narayan, 2004: 218). Feminist research aims to challenge unequal power hierarchies between researchers and research participants, valuing relationships with participants over the need to collect data and seeking to ensure participants benefit from research (Paradis, 2000: 840; Letherby, 2003: 4–7). Through answering questions about my own life, sharing food, listening to stories important to refugees and supporting refugees in obtaining information about humanitarian assistance, I sought to ensure refugees benefited from the research process (Liamputtong, 2007: 60).

Fieldwork began with participatory photography workshops, where refugees had the opportunity to discuss their day-to-day experiences using photography elicitation and through taking photographs to describe their lives. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held within the photography workshops to explore mobility and experiences living in Syria and Jordan, however the photography discussions are not outlined in this paper. After getting to know participants from workshops over a period of 5–6 weeks, interested participants were invited to join semi-structured interviews or participate in multiple life story interviews, which took place in cafes, parks and people's homes. In total, six FGDs were regularly attended by thirty-four women and nine men, while fifteen women and five men participated in semi-structured interviews, and seven women and three men participated in life story interviews. In addition, ten interviews were held with local and international

humanitarian workers. Two research assistants supported with translation during workshops and interviews and helped with transcription from Arabic into English.

Findings

The findings in this paper outline four key issues related to gender norms. First, the way humanitarian practitioners grapple with the concept of 'change' is explored, raising questions about whether 'change' is a helpful framework. These tensions in articulating change are described in the subsequent sections which explore the remaining three key issues: the lack of uniformity in gender norms, subtle and overt forms of resistance and lastly, contradictions and complexities in articulating changes in gender norms.

Usefulness of 'Change'?

The concept of change was discussed in interviews with humanitarian practitioners in two ways: first, in terms of changes refugees experience during displacement, and second, in terms of changes humanitarian actors seek through interventions. Practitioners expressed the challenges they faced in understanding refugees' lives during displacement and measuring change over time.

Practitioners reflected on their frustrations with dominant narratives about Syrians. For one practitioner, the visibility of child marriage resulted in the practice being framed solely negatively by humanitarian actors instead of from the refugees' perspective – as a practice designed to bring families together and 'tie alliances'. This participant recognised that the mobilisation to respond to child marriage was also influenced by 'misunderstanding' the meaning of marriage for this population. Another practitioner also raised the example of child marriage, discussing the assumption made by humanitarian actors that social norms, conflict, displacement and a challenging economic situation 'automatically would lead to choices around what to do with their daughters'. The statements by both practitioners draw attention to the importance of understanding practices like marriage more carefully as well as the potential for humanitarian actors to make assumptions about refugee behaviour.

A few practitioners drew attention to the need to nuance gendered experiences during displacement. The term 'vulnerability' was an example of frequently invoked terminology that needed explanation. One practitioner commented, 'Like seriously, every time, every time to every proposal I'm like "vulnerable to what?" Like, "vulnerable, the most vulnerable" [...] that means nothing! Like, what are we talking about?' Another practitioner discussed the need to move beyond only depicting women as disempowered: 'I don't think

we pay attention to the fact that women are also negotiating power. And they use many ways to negotiate their power. And they do, they have a lot of power.' Another practitioner commented on how gender norm change provided possibilities for transformation: 'I think the Syrian culture also offers the openness to change [...] there are these stereotypes or norms, but then those are not necessarily set in stone.'

Practitioners also discussed tensions associated with achieving changes through their activities, including pressure to demonstrate that programmes could bring about change. One international consultant said that the marginalisation of gender and GBV programming led to a constant need for staff working on these issues to 'vie for space'. This reinforced a culture where staff felt isolated, 'like nobody understands, so we have to show them'. She felt pressured to express confidence that their programme would end GBV by armed men.

Measuring 'change' was also particularly challenging, especially regarding GBV and child marriage: '[I]t's extremely difficult to show results or what indicators will you use to measure that.' Another practitioner reflected, 'How are you going to measure it? It is so hard.' For one humanitarian consultant, the issue was capturing complexities in changes across diverse locations: 'Change looks different in different places.' The pressure to demonstrate change to donors was also discussed, with one practitioner describing the 'big dilemma' in defining change when the donors just want to see 'that their money is actually leading to a change or to an improvement in the situation'.

Gender Norms Are Not Uniform before Conflict/Displacement

During FGDs and interviews, the notion of a fixed starting point for 'traditional' gender norms was challenged through accounts of Syrian women and men who described their lives in ways that were often different to dominant humanitarian narratives.

In one FGD, participants discussed how expectations for behaviour start at a young age. For them, such expectations were not necessarily verbally communicated, rather are modelled by others. One participant explained, '[T]hey didn't use to tell us [...] but we used to see what's right and we walk in that way.' One woman in her early 60s, Zubeida, explained household chores like this: 'Just as I saw my mother wipe and sweep the house, I would do the same. She would cook, I would cook.' She added, 'I would watch my mother doing the housework and work with her. *Ya'ni* [this means], she would look at how I did the work ... if she didn't like it she would shout at me [...] I learned everything from her and I role-played my mother in front of my siblings.' This role playing carried out by Zubeida included checking the

housework done by her younger sisters and shouting at them and hitting them so that they would improve. Zubeida further explained this linkage between behaviour of a mother and daughter by sharing a Syrian proverb, which literally means, 'turn the jar upside down but the girl would still turn out like her mother' – similar in meaning to 'like mother, like daughter'. Zubeida explained this proverb using the example of her granddaughter, who now takes care of the house, taking after her mother who was excellent at housekeeping. Zubeida laughed, exclaiming, 'Every girl turns out like her mother. It's impossible she would not.'

Other participants also reflected on learning from the actions of others. One woman described how the female schoolteacher in her village was her role model because she had a strong personality, was educated and had a salary. Another woman from Homs, who seemed to face a lot of restrictions to her behaviour due to her upbringing, said: '[I]f God sent me strong women maybe I'd become strong like them. Seriously, you learn it!' A few women mentioned that they started to wear the *hijab* because their friends did – not because their parents insisted that they should. During one life story interview, Hadiya, a woman in her 30s living with her children, husband and parents in Jordan, explained how she was the first girl to travel and live in a different place during university. Normally, girls went to Damascus to study and travelled back and forth every day. Hadiya did not obtain high enough grades to study in Damascus, so had to live in a different governorate to attend university. She explained that she was the first girl to do this; however, afterwards many girls started to register for universities in this location, and, like her, lived there. She shared another example of a woman in her village who worked in the Emirates, while her husband and children lived in Syria. This woman, slightly older than Hadiya's parents, was the first woman from their village to work alone in the Gulf, but then, '[i]t started to be *'adiyy* [normal]'. In both of these examples, behaviour that was previously not acceptable became acceptable through modelled behaviour of others. Echoing how expected behaviours shift over time, in an FGD, one man reflected on mobility and work among men and women, saying: 'Every year, more openness happens, people become *ya'ni*, they get introduced to it [...] It becomes normal, routine.'

For some women, there were strong reasons to push back on gendered expectations. Amira, a young woman pursuing university education, talked about how she has her own *nasawiyeh* [feminism]. Her views emerged from her own reading and the fact that her family lived without 'intervention' from relatives due to her father's work as an educator, which caused them to live far from family. She said, 'These limits, we created it [...] I believe that women can, but are not encouraged by their society.'

These views, shaped by Amira's family and educational background, were echoed by others like Hadiya: 'There are old people [...] They don't even give their daughters an inheritance. Even though it is their right [...] Even in Islam, she has a right.' Amira questioned Western ideas about Islam: 'They don't know the true Islam.'

Challenging dominant representations of Syrian men as inactive in the home and needing awareness to address the unequal division of labour, men may resist masculinity norms. Fuad, a young man living with his family and with strong connections to extended family, said, 'In Syria and here, I am the one who cleans the kitchen and sweeps the floor with my mum and my aunt. I wash the carpets. Everything. It's *'ādiyy* [normal]. If I lived alone, there would be no need for a woman.' Fuad's mother has a hand injury, which may have contributed to his involvement in chores, but his aunts, who are highly educated, are also very influential in Fuad's life. Another woman explained that when she worked far from home, her husband would cook. She felt this was *'ādiyy*. Her husband was used to cooking because he had lived away from his family prior to marriage. Necessity had previously changed his role, which laid the foundation to him completing housework later. Khadija, who is now in her early 60s and was married as a child, said her husband was actively involved in household tasks: 'Anything I want, I need to do, him and I do it. If I want to do the laundry, he puts it outside. If I want to sweep the floor, he like, sweeps with me.' She explained his behaviour in two ways: because 'he raised me on [with] his hand' and because he was an *imam* and it was his religious duty to help her.

These findings highlight that women (and men) may already be living out values and ideals about gender equality that humanitarian actors seek to promote. Humanitarian actors have tended to assume that interventions to promote 'gender equality and women's empowerment' start from a baseline of zero, resulting in activities to 'raise awareness' as if more modern or progressive values always need to be brought in from the outside. These findings build on the work of Abu-Lughod (1985) and Jason Hart (2008) on gender norms being communicated through observation, rather than being explicitly mandated as is sometimes assumed when humanitarian actors refer to 'culture' and 'tradition' in gender analysis.

Subtle and Overt Resistance to Gender Norms

During interviews, Syrian women described strategies they use to resist gender norms and roles. Many of these might be termed 'subtle' forms of resistance. For Reem, who wanted to continue her education, the biggest challenge was her in-laws. She married a Syrian man in Jordan and became pregnant. After having her baby, she

wanted to continue studying, but her in-laws objected, saying, '[Y]ou are married, your house, your husband, your daughter.' Reem was able to navigate these objections by proving that she could complete her household tasks: '[T]hey found [...] in my house, I wake up early, I study early, I do my house, I cook, then I finish. So, whoever came to me, my house is clean, the food is ready. That, that is the thing they were afraid of.' In this case, it was through affirming 'traditional' gender norms that Reem obtained what she wanted. This involved getting approval from others to 'resist' one norm that a mother couldn't continue education, through invoking her ability to meet gendered expectations in another area: completing caring duties. Reem bargained with her husband, choosing to prioritise her education while deciding to 'obey' his wishes regarding not working. She explained that it was important to respect his opinion because they were not in their country, his *nafs* was 'not comfortable' (a common way refugees described how the self/soul/psyche is unsettled) and 'he is tired, and suffers for us'. Like Reem, women may choose specific issues they are willing to acquiesce on, while pushing back on other topics.

Importantly, these changes are not tied to displacement specifically or framed as caused by displacement. For example, one woman in Zarqa described how when she was engaged in Syria, her fiancé wanted to take her for a walk, but her family didn't allow this. To her frustration, their walk was accompanied by his two sisters and her sister. She smiled cheekily as she described how she decided to make the walk last for an hour: 'I exhausted his sisters!' This act of resistance did not change the outcome, but it made the walk more bearable for her.

Other women described more overt forms of resistance. One key example is the case of the aunts of Fuad. Fuad's father was arrested by the *mukhābarāt* [intelligence services], resulting in his aunts (his father's sisters) going to each intelligence office for fifteen days until they found him. The aunts' action is unusual in Syria, where the *mukhābarāt* have created a culture of fear. In one FGD, a female participant explained how it was 'forbidden' for a woman to go to the *mukhābarāt*: 'this thing is just for the man'. Fuad described the actions of his aunts like this: '[M]y aunts, have strong hearts, strong personalities. They were threatened with death more than once. The guard of the intelligence building threatened them with killing. And they did not listen to him.' His aunts eventually found the prison where their brother was held and negotiated to take food to him, which caused Fuad's father to react with shock. He shouted, 'Go out, go out!' when his sister came into the prison cell, fearing harm would come to her. Fuad explained that his aunts behaved in this courageous way

because they are 'Horani women'. The 'Horan' is a geographical area describing the flatlands stretching across Syria and Jordan, from Dar'a to Irbid. Describing 'Horani women', Fuad said, 'They have courage [...] [T]hey are farmers. They have physical strength.' He explained that their experience with manual labour caused them to be strong and brave, compared to someone from a city. His depiction of Horani women may also be linked to the history of nationalist action in this region. Fuad added that others in Syria view people living in the Horan as ignorant, but all his aunts are university educated. This contextualises the somewhat startling actions of his aunts, highlighting that their upbringing, educational level as well as personalities may together support their resistance. Fuad went on to recount other examples where his aunts depicted Horani behaviour: intervening in physical fights and using violence against people who wronged their family. He also shared stories of other 'Horani women' who marched in protest against the Assad regime, and who resisted the regime and gender norms by smuggling weapons and using violence.

During life story interviews, as Fuad spent time describing stories about these aunts, as well as other Horani women, I grew increasingly surprised that a young man would speak about women in such positive terms. Fuad explained, 'How can't we be proud of them? Of course we are. In general, when a woman helps a man in his life, for sure he would be proud of her [...] My mum helped him to build the house and buy a car [...] Of course he is proud. Unless the man was bad.' As well as Fuad's stories representing examples of women resisting gender (and other) norms, his stories represented a form of resistance against gender norms, because as a male, he affirmed women who challenge norms. Fuad placed a high value on bravery, evidenced through his descriptions of how he and his friends participated in rebel activity in Syria, yet he assigned these values to his aunts and other Syrian women without qualification.

In contrast to the overwhelmingly negative humanitarian portrayal of Syrian men within humanitarian agency reports, Syrian women shared different representations of men. Leena, for example, who is now in her mid-30s, stopped attending school after the ninth grade because the new school was too far from her house. She wishes she had continued studying after marriage, and recently told her husband this. She said, 'He told me, "If you told me that you wanted to continue, I would let you continue". But I didn't tell him I wanted to.' In Jordan, her husband has encouraged her to continue her education and she is now considering this. Reem, whose father was a businessman in Damascus, explained how her father took them to book exhibitions and galleries, using these as learning opportunities. His influence now

drives her to continue completing her studies. In these examples, Syrian men were positive forces in the lives of women, challenging dominant representations of fathers as impediments to empowerment and gender equality (UNICEF, 2014: 33; UN Women, 2015b: 14–15; UNHCR, 2017: 37–41).

The findings in this paper highlight that gender norms need to be contextualised and understood with greater complexity. Resistance is not always a simple matter, but involves strategic bargaining – resisting in one area while complying in another. This dimension not always captured in the rigid indicators that describe change within humanitarian agencies. The examples in this paper highlight the need to nuance analysis beyond fixed demarcations of traditional and progressive. This paper builds on existing work on resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990) in suggesting that men too resist through their behaviour and how they talk about women who resist gender norms.

Complexities in Analysing Gender Norms

Alongside examples of resistance, some complexities emerged. The accounts of one woman, Hadiya, raise questions about how progress in shifting norms is measured. Over several life story interviews, I heard about Hadiya's experiences and met her family, including her father. Hadiya was the first person from her village to live away from home during university, encouraged by her parents, especially her father. When Hadiya finished university, he rented a property for her to start her own medical practice in their village. Challenged by a friend as I recounted the example of Hadiya, I began to probe more deeply into this seemingly excellent example of progressiveness to understand if Hadiya had 'agency'. During further interviews and conversations over social media, Hadiya was very positive about her family's role in supporting her education. She seemed confident that if she had said 'no' to going to university, her parents would have understood. I was dubious about this, reflecting on her father's personality and focus on education. When they were children, he would encourage them, saying, 'You are a paediatrician, you are a gynaecologist, you are a doctor of ...'

During our final interview, Hadiya shyly told me that she had an interview for a scholarship programme in a completely different field. She had seen an advertisement for scholarships and without telling her husband or parents (whom she lives with), applied for the programme, which involved an 18-week intensive training. She said her husband was fine with this, but she was scared to tell her parents, thinking they wouldn't agree because this was a completely different sector of work. Hadiya had tried a few times to get a health role in

Jordan, but it was never the right role or pay. Once she was offered a health role and her family initially said, ‘*Rūhi!*’ [a command, meaning ‘go!’] until they realised the salary was only 600 JD [around 600 GBP] per month. Then, her father said she shouldn’t go, and although her husband encouraged her to take it, she decided not to. After the interview, Hadiya told me that she was offered the scholarship but didn’t accept because ‘my parents didn’t like the idea’ although her husband was supportive. Later, I heard that Hadiya decided to take the opportunity anyway. She said her family weren’t happy about the 12-hour workday, but she ignored them. They saw how happy she was and were now pleased for her.

I had previously seen Hadiya’s father as someone who was more egalitarian due to his education, but then wondered about whether Hadiya has exercised agency in her life. Or, had she been pushed into a socially acceptable, lucrative field – similar to what occurs in non-humanitarian settings. Hadiya lived in a separate house to her parents after marriage – four years before the war began – but she and her husband moved back to their house in 2012 as conflict escalated. If Hadiya did gain more independence after marriage, some of it might have diminished due to living with them again in Syria and Jordan. Or, perhaps her ‘independence’ was unchanged during marriage and her parents always had a strong influence in her life decisions.

In humanitarian and development agencies, this kind of ‘complexity’ in norms is not given attention, instead, simplified narratives about gender tend to dominate analysis, as described earlier in this paper. One humanitarian worker observed that in her work, ‘[E]verything is presented as a positive. So you did this, and then this, and then that change happened [...] They’re all reporting positives.’ She reflected on how as a programme manager, she felt the need to downplay negative outcomes because of what donors would think. Another humanitarian worker suggested the issue is that agencies impose their own ideas of empowerment and equality. She said the question should be: ‘[H]ow do I ensure that I’m translating women’s opportunities and dreams the way they want to? And how do I facilitate their options and choices? Even if I think those choices are not the best choices ... but it’s not for me to make it.’

Conclusion

This paper argues that focusing on displacement-induced gender norm change reinforces colonial and paternalistic notions that without displacement, gender norms are forever fixed. The narrative that displacement is causative is often based on assumptions about who is ‘empowered’ and who is not. Fixating on ‘change’ instead of seeking to understand gender norms prior to

displacement can reinforce assumptions about refugees’ lives and over-emphasise strict divisions between peace and war (Cockburn, 2004: 43). Focusing analysis on displacement means that the pre-displacement period becomes synonymous with ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’, which ‘means not just flattening cultures, stripping moral systems of their complexity’ but means ‘erasing history’ (Abu-Lughod, 2013: 136) – a long-standing critique of humanitarian work (Malkki, 1996). When tradition and culture are invoked in the name of ‘gender analysis’, it can result in stereotypical judgements, presenting refugee experiences as fixed, homogenous, and opposed to modernity.

Speaking of ‘change’ also raises questions around measurement – who decides if change has occurred and what metrics are used to determine this? In this paper, the reflections from humanitarian practitioners reiterate that change is ‘elusive’ (Baines, 2010: 2). This study demonstrates that humanitarian judgements about refugees’ lives seem to clash with accounts from some Syrian women and men. Contrary to dominant humanitarian narratives, some Syrians may already hold ‘progressive’ beliefs about gender norms – even before humanitarians have ‘raised awareness’. The paper shows both subtle and more overt forms of Syrian women’s and men’s resistance to expected norms.

Based on this paper, I suggest five recommendations for humanitarian actors seeking to conduct gender analysis. First, shift to using resistance as a framework to understand gender norms, instead of ‘change’, because this brings a clearer focus on intersecting power hierarchies and avoids dehistoricised analysis. Second, recognise heterogeneity within gender norms. ‘Women’ and ‘men’ are not uniform categories, but an intersectional approach recognises how age, education level, family upbringing, geographical location, class and other factors shape norms. Third, take time to understand gender, resisting fast and ‘rapid’ approaches and relying first on existing data (Quay, 2019). Fourth, challenge colonial, paternalistic stereotypes about women and men. Gendered inequalities need to be framed from local/national perspectives instead of outsiders determining these require modernisation based on Eurocentric perspectives (Peace Direct, 2021). Finally, reflect complexity in analysis instead of relying on singular, dominant narratives. People’s complicated decision-making and agency cannot always be easily smoothed over or generalised.

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