

# Gendered Power Struggles beyond the Male-Female Dichotomy

## *Syrian Mothers-in-Law Exercising Power within Patriarchal Structures*

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**Abstract:** Analysis of gendered power struggles often describes men's use of power over women. In some academic research, as well as analysis by development and humanitarian agencies who seek to promote gender equality, power may be framed narrowly. Such analysis may neglect how family relationships are shaped not only by gender but also by intersections between gender and age. This article is based on feminist ethnographic research among Syrian refugees in Jordan as well as interviews with humanitarian workers. It uses accounts of power struggles between Syrian mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to illustrate how family dynamics shift as women advance in age. The paper complicates assumptions about men's power, arguing that policy-makers and gender practitioners should also consider how older women use power.

**Keywords:** gender, intersectionality, mother-in-law, older women, refugee, Syria

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On two occasions during fieldwork, I was served coffee by women who made jokes about the coffee saucer (the plate under the coffee cup) symbolising a 'mother-in-law'. Eman said, 'We don't serve the mother-in-law!' and 'Where is the mother-in-law? Don't you want her?', while laughingly explaining that the missing saucer was the 'mother-in-law'. Mais, during her interview, said that when she was with her in-laws, if she picked up a cup of coffee without the saucer, it would send a message that she did not like or want her mother-in-law. Another woman, Roula, whose accounts feature in this article, laughingly said she could tell stories about her mother-in-law for two months and still have more to say. Underpinning the humour of these offhand comments



emerged accounts of mothers-in-law using their power over daughters-in-law. In my research on gender norms among Syrians, I sought to understand this particular relationship alongside contrasting narratives from humanitarian agencies about Syrian women's vulnerability and disempowerment.

Humanitarian agencies seeking to promote gender equality and empower women at times rely on assumptions about how men and women use power. In research and technical guidance documents issued by humanitarian agencies, scholars observe that the male 'other' is imbued with negative, violent behaviours (Cornwall 2014:133; Olivius 2016: 57). Men are depicted as using power in oppressive ways, forcing women and girls into decisions. For example, reports often cast fathers as impediments to empowerment and gender equality (UNHCR 2017: 37–41; UNICEF 2014: 33; UN Women 2015: 14–15) or draw attention to the negative dynamic between husband and wife, which often results in physical violence (CARE International 2013: 22; World Vision 2020: 43–45). Women are primarily depicted as using power when they have been 'empowered' (ideally by these organisations), though there are examples where humanitarian actors have acknowledged women's independence and empowerment separate from humanitarian intervention (CARE 2020: 14). In humanitarian narratives, women's use of power tends to be framed narrowly: as a means for women to emancipate themselves and their families through economic activity (Cornwall 2014: 131). Perhaps because men's use of power may involve physical violence (which has immediate and often significant impacts), women's use of power 'over' others (which is assumed to be non-violent) is rarely considered by humanitarian actors.

This article builds on Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) work on the 'patriarchal bargain' and Laila Rabho's (2015) analysis of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships in Palestine. It presents ethnographic accounts of Syrian women to explore relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, situating this female-female dynamic within broader family relationships to demonstrate the importance of taking an intersectional lens to understanding gendered power struggles. The article begins by outlining existing literature and a theoretical framework to position power and intersectionality, followed by a description of fieldwork methods in Jordan. The research findings detail the relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law through several accounts from Syrian women, with a specific focus on the experiences of two Syrian women—Roula and Dina.

## **Situating Women's Use of Power**

Humanitarian agencies have long been critiqued for 'one size fits all' depictions of aggressive men and victimised women (Jacobson et al. 2000: 12). Within humanitarian emergencies, the narrative focuses on how emasculated men have no choice but to use violence during displacement (Olivius 2016:

59). Narrow ideas about men and women lead humanitarians to call men ‘perpetrators of violence’ or ‘guardians of patriarchy’ (Grabska 2014: 89). In contrast, women are depicted as lacking agency and needing empowerment, voice, and skills (UNHCR 2017; World Vision International 2020). Analysis of family decision-making tends to be limited to women’s versus men’s decision-making (World Food Programme 2018: 28), or at most comparing adults’ with adolescents’ decision-making, limiting fuller intersectional analysis of age dynamics (CARE 2022: 11). Thus, addressing gender inequality has come to be equated with a focus on the husband-wife relationship within humanitarian and development interventions (Cornwall and Rivas 2015: 403). Andrea Cornwall (2014) suggests that the ‘preoccupation with marital relationships’ in international development occurs ‘as if these specific kinds of relations constituted the totality of gender relations’ (128). Her critique emphasises how analysis dismisses not only women’s use of power, but also how other familial relationships may be gendered.

Narratives about how men use power and how husbands and wives interact have direct consequences for the interventions developed by humanitarian agencies. Within these discourses, problems of inequality are caused by the lack of knowledge, education, skills, or ‘awareness’, relegating power to the sidelines (Calkin 2015: 297; Cornwall and Rivas 2015: 398). Critiquing the generalisations made about Muslim women and the subsequent interventions by outside actors, Lila Abu-Lughod (2013: 192) asserts: ‘The standard idea is that patriarchy is the problem. The solutions are shelters, police training, anger management training, media campaigns to increase awareness, the development of women’s rights consciousness, holding governments accountable for not protecting women, and becoming modern’.

Academic scholarship on gender relations in the Middle East has also reflected an interest in marital relationships. However, while emphasising how marriage shapes social relationships and identity in Syria (Salamandra 2006: 161), scholars observe heterogeneity and complex power relations that structure Syrian marriages (Kastrinou 2016: 2), as well as marriages in the Middle East region broadly (Hopkins 2003). Academic literature has also challenged the idea of ‘the omnipresent role’ of patriarchy within families in the Middle East (Dahlgren 2008: 5). Suad Joseph (1999: 11) grounds patriarchy within kinship structures, using the concept of ‘relationality’ to describe how kin relationships shape a sense of self. Other scholars also emphasise the value placed on relationships with others rather than individual identity (Hudson 2008: 72; Rugh 1984: 35). Within relational, patriarchal kinship structures, it is not only men, but also elders (including women) who see it as their role to shape decisions of females and younger family members (Joseph 1999: 12). Family dynamics are not ‘seamless’ (Joseph 1999: 18), rather dynamics within families need to be contextualised. Patriarchy itself ‘has to be continually reinforced, re-constructed and re-established’ and may evolve in new ways while its key components ‘remain constant’ (Saigol 2002: 8). Patriarchy and women’s

subordination are not fixed (Mahmood 2001:205) but may evolve based on intersections with other power hierarchies.

While scholars rightly observe that research on Syrian family life is limited (Chatty 2018: 234), there are studies on family dynamics in the Middle East more broadly. For example, Beshara Doumani (2017: 17) questions the notion that families conform to a particular type, suggesting this perpetuates Orientalism. Scholars emphasise that families vary based on rural-urban differences, religion, class, ethnicity, and other factors (Rabo 2008: 131) and are not always nuclear in structure. Within the literature, there is recognition that extended family dynamics may not always be positive, but can involve ‘conflict and control’ (Abu Nahleh 2006: 116). At times, family obligations may supersede marriage bonds (Meriwether 1999: 111; Zbeidy 2020: 145), as I have also found in my own research among Syrian refugees (Lokot 2019). Within kinship structures, women may exercise power ‘beyond the dichotomy of victimization/acceptance’, which flattens how women ‘accept, accommodate, ignore, resist, or protest—sometimes all at the same time’ (MacLeod 1992: 534). Studies suggests women may sometimes benefit from constructions of gender norms (Shami 1996: 23), including using their power to ensure other women comply with norms (Williamson and Nimri 2009: 38). Scholars challenge the notion of ‘presumed harmony among women’, highlighting women’s power struggles (Salamandra 2004: 62). While literature on Syrian women’s use of power outside the home (especially in political acts of resistance) continues to emerge (Gissi 2020), women’s power within the home remains understudied.

Notwithstanding these studies that challenge dominant humanitarian and development agency depictions of women, in academic literature on Middle Eastern families, few scholars have engaged specifically with power dynamics between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (Inhorn 1996; Kandiyoti 1988; Rabho 2015; Rabo 2008; Sidhva et al. 2021; Williamson and Nimri 2009) despite this relationship being often understood as a challenging one in other cultural contexts. Deniz Kandiyoti’s landmark work on the ‘patriarchal bargain’ (1988; 1998) provides a theoretical framework for this female-female dynamic. The patriarchal bargain refers to women using strategies to resist and gain power as a reaction to the patriarchal system they find themselves in: ‘women’s attachment to and stake in certain forms of patriarchal arrangements may derive neither from false consciousness, nor from conscious collusion but from an actual stake in certain positions of power available to them’ (Kandiyoti 1998: 143). A son’s marriage becomes an opportunity for women—who have previously been denied power—to assert control. Kandiyoti positions the son as critical to this power struggle: ‘Since sons are a woman’s most critical resource, ensuring their life-long loyalty is an enduring preoccupation’ (1988: 279). Kandiyoti revisited the ‘patriarchal bargain’ ten years later to suggest that power and resistance are more complex concepts than her work originally implied. Her critique of her own work reflected that women do not always behave according to gender ideologies (1998: 139). However, the concept of

a ‘patriarchal bargain’ remains important in articulating the strategies women use to gain power amidst even rapidly changing power hierarchies.

Laila Rabho’s research among Palestinian women emphasises the role of the son in power struggles between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law; both women are striving to ‘benefit’ from their relationship with him (2015: 458). She writes: ‘Eager to continue being the most important woman in her son’s life, the mother-in-law “declares war” on the woman who assumes her position. It is not just the desire to regain the son’s love and attention, but to use the son as a tool to gain control of the home’ (2015: 464). Both Rabho and Kandiyoti position power dynamics as cyclical: the mother-in-law seeks to control her daughter-in-law like she was controlled by her mother-in-law. In the Syrian context, Annika Rabo documents cases where the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dynamic is characterised by unequal power. This includes a mother-in-law in a Raqqa village mobilising her daughter-in-law for joint family work. Her examples show that physical proximity to the daughter-in-law contributes to tension (2008: 139–148).

## Theoretical Framework

### *Feminist Approaches to Understanding Power*

This article is guided by feminist theories, which, while diverse, are united in the belief that oppression based on gender disproportionately and negatively shapes women’s lives. However, scholars have drawn attention to the problems with homogenising women’s experiences while framing men as ‘the other’ (Krekula 2007: 156–157). Gender is now often recognised as a social construction that cannot be understood in isolation, but which intersects with other identities and power hierarchies such as ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, education level, and geographical location. The concept of intersectionality was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight that a singular level of analysis that fails to capture the complex combinations of intersecting power has detrimental effects: ‘when one discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of the other, the power relations that each attempts to challenge are strengthened’ (1991: 282). Intersectional analysis means that ‘women’ are not seen as a homogenous group, rather intersecting oppressions shape their experiences (Al-Ali and Pratt 2009; Mohanty 1988; Muhanna-Matar 2022).

Feminists have articulated the importance of conducting intersectional analysis of gender and age, recognising how older women’s experiences are not always understood (Calasanti and Slevin 2006; Grenier and Hanley 2007). Some feminist theorists focus on old age signifying a loss of power (Walby 1996: 8; Calasanti and Slevin 2006: 5–6), while acknowledging the need to avoid generalising about women’s use of power as they grow older (Calasanti and Slevin 2006: 6; Muhlbauer 2015: 3). These tensions reflect existing debates

about how women are positioned within structures of power, with some emphasising men's domination of women while others focus on women's agency and non-victimhood (Allen 1998: 22–23). Amy Allen observes that women do not necessarily exercise power in 'benevolent' ways and that being a woman does not mean that women cannot use their power to cause harm to others (1998: 31). She urges the importance of a broad understanding of power as 'the ability or capacity of an actor or set of actors to act', suggesting this enables an understanding of different forms of 'domination, resistance, and solidarity' (1998: 36). Taking this broader approach to power, this article explores relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.

## **Methodology**

This article is part of doctoral research that sought to understand the experiences of Syrian refugees in the context of dominant humanitarian narratives about gender norms related to familial relationships, social change, and mobility. Fieldwork took place in Jordan from September 2016 to May 2017. Research methods were informed by a feminist perspective, which meant being inductive rather than trying to prove a hypothesis. As such, after a few months of fieldwork, I revised my research questions to include a greater focus on family relationships, including mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dynamics, in response to women discussing their interactions and conflicts with family members. As an Australian-educated woman of Sri Lankan origin with experience working in humanitarian organisations, I recognised my own assumptions and knowledge gaps. Throughout the fieldwork process, I sought to intentionally address power hierarchies between research participants, my research assistants and me by prioritising building relationships with participants, listening to issues that they felt were important and providing personal information about myself to refugees (Malkki 1995: 51; Minh-ha 1989: 1). Within this relational approach, I recognised how my shifting, intersecting positionalities affected how I was perceived by participants. Participants were curious about my ethnicity and were surprised to hear my age, thinking I was younger than I am. Some older women used the opportunity of hearing that I was married to offer advice and concern about why I did not have children.

Self-settled Syrian refugees living in the areas of Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash, and Amman were invited to participate in the research. These refugees were aged 18 to 60 years old and were primarily from Dar'a, Damascus, and Homs in Syria. The research began with participatory photography workshops held in Zarqa, Irbid, and Amman over either five or six weeks (depending on location). These workshops incorporated focus group discussions. In total, 43 Syrian women and men consistently participated in these weekly workshops. During the workshops, which were held in local community-based organisations, participants discussed how they spend their time in Jordan (compared

to Syria), taking photographs to capture their day-to-day experiences. During workshops, relationships were built with Syrian women and men, who were then invited to participate in individual interviews. In total, 30 Syrian women and men participated in interviews, specifically 20 participated in semi-structured interviews and 10 in life story interviews (more in depth, consisting of multiple, longer interviews). More women than men participated in interviews due to men's competing work priorities. These interviews were held primarily in participants' homes, as well as local cafes, parks, and within local organisation buildings. Participant observation was also carried out at people's homes and in local community-based organisations, cafes, and markets. I also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with international and local humanitarian workers. The research was conducted with support from two research assistants, who assisted with translation and transcribed exact words of participants into English from audio recordings. Data was coded thematically using Nvivo. Identifying information was removed from participant accounts. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

The findings of this article draw largely upon the semi-structured and life story interviews with Syrians, alongside existing (English-language) literature exploring these dynamics. The participant reflections on mothers-in-law are primarily from the perspectives of daughters-in-law, based on my access to women in Jordan, thus do not necessarily present a complete picture of the dynamic. The article refers to relationships between sons and mothers, but also in a limited way, as the majority of research participants were women. While the broader doctoral research was concerned with understanding changes in family dynamics during displacement, this article does not specifically focus on displacement.

## **Findings**

The findings in this article highlight the influence and power exercised by mothers-in-law, as recounted to me by young and middle-aged women. The key themes focus on power struggles, control, proxy actors, and the role of relationality in sustaining these dynamics.

### *Power Struggles and Acts of Resistance*

My research findings demonstrate complex power struggles underlying female-female interactions. During interviews, women joked about their mothers-in-law, taking the opportunity to tell stories of how they had been ill-treated when they got married. Roula, whose interactions with her mother-in-law will be analysed in depth in this article, responded to a question about her life before the war by saying this about her mother-in-law: 'She was the one who upset all my life!' Although the accounts about mothers-in-law often

communicated distress and anger, women also used humour to discuss their experiences, incorporating imitations and jokes about their mothers-in-law during interviews.

Roula is a middle-aged Syrian woman now living in Irbid within a challenging economic situation. During interviews, she outlined many examples of mistreatment from her mother-in-law, including emotional, verbal, and physical violence. Roula was thrown out of the home that she and her husband shared with his mother when her husband happened to be away. In another instance, Roula and her husband were both thrown out of the mother-in-law and father-in-law's home less than twenty-four hours after she gave birth. Other acts were less serious: Roula's mother-in-law once saw that Roula's washing was hanging outside on the line to dry and threw these clothes onto the dirt; when Roula's husband passed away, her mother-in-law hid the gold Roula was entitled to and mocked her about her widowhood.

Roula joked, 'I could talk to you for two months and not finish all the stories I have!' During their marriage, Roula's mother-in-law and sister-in-law found a second wife for Roula's husband. Roula said this plan was formed 'to spite me' without her husband's knowledge. Roula explained the second marriage: 'They [her mother-in-law and sister-in-law] were abnormally jealous of me because . . . my husband and I always loved each other and always, always, we walk together. You'd find us always like newlyweds.' Their love was what may be termed a 'social threat' to the family (Abdallah 2009: 59), strengthening Kandiyoti's (1988: 279) argument that older women limit romantic love to retain a son's loyalty. This second marriage ended in divorce.

Roula's daughter, Aya, also participated in the research and was present during the interviews with her mother. Her comments diffused Roula's anger:

Do you know if it was a whole book she wouldn't be able to finish telling you all the stories of my mean grandmother. I am asking you for something. I am asking you that when you publish it, publish it with her full name and make it public! (*all women laughing*) This is my request to you! Do you know? You will get so many likes on it because of how mean she is!

Sharing these stories and making jokes was cathartic for Roula and Aya, perhaps as a means of reclaiming power. As they spoke, it became clear that these stories were not private, rather the behaviour of Roula's mother-in-law was known throughout their community. A Syrian idiom, which another participant shared, suggests that secrets are to be kept within families. Loosely translated, the idiom states 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. In the case of Roula, however, the 'entire neighbourhood' were 'fed up' with Roula's mother-in-law. Roula said she did not resist her mother-in-law's treatment because of *sutra*—the idea of keeping shame away. Roula said, 'Ya 'nī [it means], if I wanted to respond to her, I'm going to expose myself in the neighbourhood, you know?' Her inaction against her mother-in-law was



affirmed by the people who knew about it: '[A]ll the neighbours, they praise me for not answering back at her'. Social convention dictated that Roula accept this treatment.

Other research participants discussed the actions of their mothers-in-law, including complications in marriages between cousins. For Zubeida, marrying her son to her niece was a mistake that created friction and competition between her and her sister. Dina also faced difficulties with her mother-in-law (who is also her aunt) and sister-in-law (her cousin), who she did not know before the marriage was arranged because she lived in a different city. Dina's treatment may be linked to the relationship between Dina's mother and Dina's now mother-in-law (the sisters). Dina's case is unique because her father-in-law was no longer alive, leaving Dina's mother-in-law with more power, which she wielded both herself as well as through her daughters, as outlined below.

In Syria, Dina and her husband lived with his family, in a room within the same house. Her husband was the eldest child, and she was the first daughter-in-law. After just three days living there, Dina was thrown out by his family when she intervened in a quarrel between her husband's two sisters. This was a temporary expulsion. Like Roula's experience, the issue of housing was one where the mother-in-law (and sisters-in-law) exercised control. Unlike the case of Roula, where the house was owned by his parents, Dina's husband owned a share in the family house and also covered other expenses for his mother and sisters, including food and drinks. Dina links his financial contributions to her challenges: 'I took their brother—the one who was spending money on them'. He continued providing for his natal family after marriage, but Dina guessed his family felt that his marriage would limit their financial support. Later, without asking permission, Dina's sisters-in-law moved into the apartment that Dina's husband had purchased for the two of them, which was just above the mother-in-law's house. Dina said, '[M]y mother-in-law didn't let me move upstairs and live in it, she kept me in the room in her house'. His sisters later continued to live there when they each married. Dina was shocked at her husband's inaction when this happened: '[M]y husband didn't open his mouth! They told my husband to move out and rent!' A year before moving to Jordan, they were asked to leave the room they were staying in because his other brother was getting married: 'They knocked on our door and told us, "You rent and leave"'. For both Roula and Dina, housing was a tool used to control their daughters-in-law and maintain influence over sons, similar to other research (Inhorn 1996: 153).

Dina faced challenges when she had her first child. Her in-laws took control of her baby, including feeding him and changing his nappies:

It's not because they love him, but because they want to harm me . . . I want to see him, but I could only see him with them. 'Oh, this person took him and left', they would say . . . And then they'd say, 'She'd gone to my grandmother'; 'She went out to buy something'; 'She went to the market' . . . This is a baby, why take him?

Dina discussed how this behaviour reflected the concept of *kayd*, which is a term used in the Qur'an to refer to the craftiness of women, who use devious methods to achieve their aims. Dina felt she was treated badly because 'they don't want me'. Once, while her son was a baby, Dina came to take her baby from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law while they were eating, but her baby did not want to leave; he was more interested in the food being eaten. This resulted in a violent altercation:

[T]hey started screaming at me, 'Leave him, what do you want with him!' She [the mother-in-law] pulled me from my hair and from my headscarf and threw me on the floor. And there was a shoe on the floor. She picked it up and started hitting me with it . . . I rang my husband but he pretended not to hear . . . *Ya 'nī*, what can he do for me, nothing. 'What do you want with him? Leave him here. They will take care of him.'

Since her husband sided with his family, Dina took matters into her own hands with her second child, telling them, 'Enough. You have my first one; this one will stay with me'. She would make excuses whenever they took him: 'I would run to them and say, "Oh, no! He needs cleaning. Let me change him"'. She would give him two or three baths a day simply as an excuse to have time with him. She laughed, cheekily adding, 'Praised be Allah, as soon as they carried him, he vomited on them'. These acts of resistance helped Dina reclaim a little power. She invoked her expected role as mother, using the justification of caregiving tasks to prevent her in-laws from limiting access to her baby. Like Roula, who found some relief in discussing the behaviour of her mother-in-law, Dina was animated in discussing her mother-in-law, imitating her through a dancing movement—a small act of defiance through mockery.

The accounts from Roula and Dina challenge assumptions about women's apparently-inherently peaceful relationships, which inform interventions implemented by development and humanitarian agencies. In my research, one humanitarian worker explained how humanitarian agency interventions are predicated on the idea that 'women are peaceful; men are violent'. This 'easy narrative', she suggested, has resulted in a lack of understanding of how women negotiate power throughout their lives. Her argument was that blaming men has resulted in organisations missing 'intergenerational battles', specifically the way age shapes gendered relationships.

### *Subtle Forms of Control and the Power of Proximity*

It is important to note that Roula's and Dina's accounts are quite extreme. Power within mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships can take various forms. Importantly, as Kandiyoti pointed out in 1998, and illustrated by the examples below, relationships may not easily fit into 'frameworks' (1998: 144), rather efforts should be made to carefully contextualise these complicated power struggles.

For example, Zubeida positioned herself as a source of wisdom for her daughter-in-law, giving her advice on how to interact with her son. Her daughter-in-law, who lives with her in Jordan, was in the room with us when Zubeida explained these tips, nodding as Zubeida spoke at length and occasionally interjecting to agree—in-between being sent off to run errands for Zubeida. Zubeida said: ‘If you want to win over your husband . . . , then don’t talk back at him! . . . This is what I tell my daughter-in-law and I tell my daughters. “Don’t have a long tongue! Don’t talk back!”’ Here, Zubeida directly attempted to influence her son’s marriage, encouraging her daughter-in-law and her own daughters to treat their husbands well. This articulation of power, combined with my observations of Zubeida’s somewhat-authoritarian manner with her daughter-in-law, suggests that the ‘patriarchal bargain’ is alive and well. Zubeida’s own authority is legitimised through the process of giving advice that, if taken, keeps the men happy, while she remains the all-knowing older matriarch.

In other cases, the dynamic between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law takes more subtle forms. Leena, for example, married her cousin and already knew her mother-in-law well. Her mother-in-law taught her how to cook. When she had her first baby, she lived with her in-laws and her mother-in-law helped her (even more than her own mother) in caring for the baby. Despite this positive relationship, her mother-in-law still exercised control over how Leena raised her son. She would argue when Leena physically disciplined her child, such that Leena secretly punished him to avoid her mother-in-law’s ire: ‘I used to hit him behind her back, not in front of her’. Hadiya, another woman who I interviewed, initially faced challenges with her in-laws, especially when she wanted to move out with her husband into their own accommodation. However, their relationship improved over time. For another woman, Lara, who lived with her husband’s parents in the first year of marriage, interference with chores was a problem, so she complied to avoid problems with her mother-in-law.

For many women who discussed mothers-in-law, living with or close to their in-laws seemed to worsen the relationship, similar to Rabo’s research in urban Raqqa (2008: 139). Amira reflected on the experiences of her Syrian friend, who married a Syrian man after arriving in Jordan. The in-laws live in the same building: ‘If her mother-in-law sees her going outside the home, [she] will ask her, ‘Where are you going? Where are you going? You must be at home. You just be doing your house. You must be caring for your husband and your daughter’. So, she is facing that’. Dina and two other research participants, Eman and Farah, reflected on how living a greater distance away from their mothers-in-law during displacement has made life a little easier. Dina reflected that living away from her husband’s family improved her relationship with her husband. For Eman, who, like Dina, married her cousin, living in Jordan has offered her more freedom from the ‘non-negotiable opinions’ of her in-laws because she is no longer living with them. She felt this meant less interference and

greater ability for a married couple to get to know each other. She explained: ‘[I]f they said to their son, “Divorce her”, he would divorce. No problem. Yes, they would say: “Divorce!” “Kill!” [this refers to physical abuse such as hitting] “Don’t let her!” Many things. That’s why it’s better here!’ Eman also said: ‘[S]o many mothers-in-law ruined the homes of their sons! (*laughing*) Especially for girls! So much! (*laughing*) So much! The ones that get divorced, the ones that get beaten, the ones whose lives are just ruined!’ She gave the example of her older sister, who was married at the age of 13. After one year, because her sister had not gotten pregnant, her sister’s mother-in-law ‘had her divorced’ and married her son to another woman. However, this son later took Eman’s sister back as his wife because he loved her.

For Farah, even leaving Syria was linked to the difficult relationship with her in-laws: ‘I left because there was family pressure in the marriage—from my husband’s family, pressure’. She explained that this pressure was because of her mother-in-law. Before marriage, Farah owned a business that hired out dresses, but she was not permitted to work after marriage. She said, ‘My married life affected my working life!’ When she and her husband left Syria, Farah explained the relief she felt, though this may also be linked to them fleeing conflict. When she left, her mother-in-law burnt all her business supplies, including dresses that Farah would hire out.

### *Proxy Sisters-in-Law and Silent Husbands*

Dina’s accounts of conflicts with her mother-in-law highlight the role of sisters-in-law within female-female power struggles. Dina observed the influence her sisters-in-law held over her husband: ‘She and her daughters! . . . Every time they came, they would buzz in his ear’. Although it was initially Dina’s mother-in-law who encouraged her son to travel by sea to Europe, she drew on her daughters to convince her son that he should leave Jordan. They came together and convinced Dina and her husband that he should follow his brother-in-law who was already in Europe. Dina saw this behaviour as linked to her mother-in-law’s jealousy of the house she and her husband lived in. Her mother-in-law’s acts may also have been a reaction to her perceived decrease in power because family members now lived in multiple locations across Jordan, instead of together like in Syria. Dina’s mother-in-law may have felt she needed reinforcement to convince her son to leave Jordan, which is why she brought in her daughters to encourage this move. With her husband gone, Dina became isolated. Once, when Dina’s husband was in Europe, her mother-in-law came to visit. She stood at Dina’s doorway and jeered, ‘We heard your husband married another wife!’—something that was not true. Dina’s sisters-in-law would make comments to her husband that focused on Dina’s negative qualities, similar to what Rabho found (2015: 461). This created rifts between her and her husband: ‘[H]is sisters would put words in his ear, “Your wife did this, your wife did that”. Then he would come confront me,

and I wouldn't know what to say back at him'. While Roula's husband, avoided taking sides, Dina's husband turned on his wife, something Rabho also found in her research (2015: 462).

One particular incident in Syria demonstrates how Dina's mother-in-law and sisters-in-law united against Dina. This incident began with Dina's husband, who one day was angry that his food was not ready. He asked Dina, 'Why is my food in the pot and not on my plate?' before leaving to talk to his mother. When he returned, he ate the food and then became angry that Dina had not eaten with him (which Dina attributes to the conversation he had with his mother), then started to hit and verbally 'divorce' her. Dina was hit by her husband multiple times and thrown from their bed. She says her mother-in-law could hear what was happening from the next room, but did nothing, and later laughed when Dina told her what happened. Dina's sister-in-law then came into the room, ostensibly to pull Dina and her husband apart, but she then joined the husband in hitting Dina, who sustained injuries and ended up in hospital, losing the baby she was pregnant with. While in hospital recovering, her other sister-in-law came to visit and attacked Dina: 'She pulled me from my hair and her other hand she wanted to grab me like that and pull me, her fingernails were this long (*gesturing*). She grabbed me like this. And her fingers ended up in my nose, and she injured me. I bled a lot, *wallah* (I swear on God's Name/Oh my God)'. This sister-in-law's long nails scraped the inside of Dina's nose, injuring her nasal canal, which resulted in a deviated septum that Dina needed surgery to repair. Dina still cannot smell out of one side of her nose.

Why this second act of violence? Dina commented on the two incidents: 'I could have put him in jail together with his sisters'. It may be that the family feared that Dina would respond to the loss of her baby by reporting the violence, so this additional violence in her hospital bed may have represented a threat on behalf of the family. In this power dynamic, each sister-in-law was effectively an extension of the mother-in-law. While Lamis Abu Nahleh references the controlling behaviour of a sister-in-law and mother-in-law towards a daughter-in-law (2006: 128), she does not link the behaviour of the sister-in-law to the mother-in-law. Marcia Inhorn's analysis in Egypt found that a sister-in-law may take the place of the mother-in-law after the mother-in-law dies (1996: 172), however my findings reveal further complexity—sisters-in-law can exercise power even while their mothers are alive. The 'anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women' (Kandiyoti 1988: 279) may prove too enticing for some younger women, who decide to gain a preview of the patriarchal bargain by wielding power against the newest family member. In the example above, the sisters-in-law became the mother-in-law's proxies, drawing on relationships they had established with their brother, to influence him. Dina herself reflected on how her mother-in-law's behaviour spread to the sisters-in-law: 'I am convinced now that my mother-in-law is like tooth decay! She gathers her daughters and brings them here to us!'

A less extreme example of the combined role of a mother-in-law and sister-in-law emerges from the account of Khadija, who lived with her in-laws for ten years when she first got married at age 12, and returned to her in-laws for a short period after her husband died. She described her initial relationship with her in-laws in transactional terms: “They paid money for me. They think they can buy me like a sheep (*chuckling*). “We paid money for her; let her come and serve us”. This links to the idea that a ‘return on investment’ for the dowry is justified (Williamson and Nimri 2009: 43). Khadija’s in-laws had a family of eight girls but like in Rabho’s research, as the daughter-in-law, the bulk of the work fell to her (2015: 461). Daughters-in-law often occupy the lowest social position and may be subject to the decisions and authority of older women in the family (Sidhva et al. 2021: 11). Her sisters-in-law were surprised at the dynamic between Khadija and her husband, especially that Khadija’s husband gave her freedom to visit her parents and siblings. The relationship with her sister-in-law and parents-in-law worsened after Khadija’s husband died unexpectedly. Her parents-in-law feared that Khadija would remarry and her sister-in-law worried that her husband would take Khadija as a second wife, creating tension in her interactions with Khadija. The power dynamics associated with being a young widow facing difficult financial circumstances and being an outsider meant that she experienced years of challenging interactions.

The examples in this article might suggest that a mother-in-law’s rise to power is inevitable. Dina however directly rejected the idea that she would behave in the same way to her future daughter-in-law:

[M]aybe this is how mothers-in-law are! But when my son gets married in the future, I can’t imagine myself running behind my daughter-in-law telling her, ‘Your husband married another wife!’ or tell them to go travel away and send my son away, to travel somewhere and leave his children behind! *Haram* [here, this means forbidden]! Isn’t that *haram*?

While this is Dina’s reaction now, the ‘patriarchal bargain’ could become more appealing over time. Time may harden resentment towards her mother-in-law, resulting in Dina wanting reclaim power when she becomes a mother-in-law. Or, perhaps the opposite will be true and the cyclical nature of the patriarchal bargain will be broken through Dina deciding to behave differently to how she was treated.

### *Mother-Son Dynamics*

The accounts in this article raise an important question: where are the husbands? Interestingly, the dynamic between a mother and son helps to contextualise the apparent silence of husbands. In Roula’s case, her husband tended to avoid siding with anyone, not saying more than, ‘May Allah show you the right path, mother!’ She added, ‘She would pray bad things for him, and he would say, “Allah guide you mother!”’ Roula explained these mild responses:

‘My husband, *haram*, [here, this means poor/helpless] is a very quiet man and doesn’t upset anyone . . . And he respects his mother . . . *Ya ‘nī*, if it was any of her other sons, maybe they would kill her if she did that to them.’ Like Roula, Dina justified her husband’s behaviour, saying, ‘[H]e wants to please his mother so she doesn’t resent him’. Reflecting on how her husband did not act when his sisters moved into their apartment without permission, she said, ‘[H]e was under a lot of pressure because he is the oldest one. He is the one who paid the money for everyone’s expenses’. Dina similarly commented, ‘I don’t blame him for anything that happened in Syria, because he has a kind heart . . . even here I felt that he was the one most unfairly treated, it’s sinful . . .’. Despite experiencing violence and multiple verbal divorces from her husband, Dina consistently tied her husband’s behaviour to his mother. Positioning him as a victim who is manipulated by his mother may be a coping mechanism to make sense of her situation. Echoing Rabho’s (2015) findings, it appears that the husband (son) holds less power than the mother-in-law (his mother). In the case of Roula’s husband, perhaps his gentle personality resulted in the mother-in-law having more power. In Dina’s case, the fact that her father-in-law was deceased and the marriage was between cousins, explains the mother-in-law’s strong role. These examples demonstrate that it is not always easy to understand how and why power moves in different directions (Abu-Lughod 2013: 6).

Understanding the mother-son dynamic helps to situate the treatment of daughters-in-law. Halim Barakat argues that the relationship between Arab mothers and sons ‘verges on morbidity’ (1993: 100). The relationship between mothers and daughters has been less of a focus in Middle East literature compared to mothers and sons or fathers and sons (Sayigh 2002: 57). Fatima Mernissi suggests that love for a wife is ‘discouraged’ in Muslim societies: ‘his mother is the only woman a man is allowed to love at all’ (1987: 121). Andrea Rugh notes that in Egypt, a son represents a mother’s status and future protection (1984: 80). John Borneman’s research in Aleppo suggests that mothers treat sons ‘as the husband they had wished for’, arguing that sons side with their mothers over their fathers and over their wives (2007: 27–28). Sons may also place more value on the opinions of their mothers compared to their wives. Abu Nahleh recounts the example of a young Palestinian woman whose husband only sought advice of his mother about starting a business, while his wife was on the outside, holding lower status in the family (2006: 128).

The references to the mother-son relationship came out clearly in the life story of Ibrahim; although importantly, other men only made passing references to their mothers. He said, ‘Whatever my mother says I listen to her’. Ibrahim’s positioning of his mother over his wife came out multiple times during interviews. He said, ‘I don’t get anything that I don’t share with my mother first. I told my wife before marrying her, “My mother and family first comes and then you”’. He linked his treatment of his mother and father to the concept of *riḍā* in the Qur’an, which emphasises the notion of the mother

being pleased with her son or daughter and giving her blessing. Ibrahim's wife, Yasmeen, who participated in a semi-structured interview, was also present in these interviews, chopping vegetables or cutting her nails as I interviewed her husband, and interjecting from time to time with her own comments:

Ibrahim: My mother is . . . (*long pause, as if he is trying to find a word to describe her*). I got married and had kids. I have to go in the early morning to say hello to her. And in the evening.

Yasmeen: I became jealous of her (*laughing*).

. . .

Ibrahim: If I am bringing delicious food, first I will go to my mum and father and give them, then I will give it to my wife and children.

. . .

Ibrahim: I never in my life made my mother angry. Even when she got upset with my wife, and sometimes it would be the fault of my mother or siblings, I would still stand by my mother, not my wife.

Yasmeen: At last, he admits it! (*laughing*)

. . .

Ibrahim: I got married and had children but every Eid I would go clean the walls and ceilings for my mother. The ceilings—high! So, I would get up there and clean the walls and ceilings.

Yasmeen: He cleans the walls for his mother but for his wife he doesn't! (*laughing*)

In this account, Ibrahim specifically noted his preference of his mother over his wife. Yasmeen did not appear outwardly annoyed by this, seeming to find it amusing. She felt there is a special connection between a mother and son, and father and daughter, and added cheerfully, 'My mother loves the boys; she discriminates. Yes, and my father loves the girls more.'

When Ibrahim and his wife were newlyweds, his parents were paying off their car in instalments, but found themselves unable to make a payment. Ibrahim sold his wife's jewellery, giving the money to his mother. While Ibrahim placed more emphasis on his mother than his father in telling stories about his life, he also referenced the importance of his relationship with his father, who passed away some twenty years ago. Although the examples in this section come from only one man, it is important nevertheless to see how Ibrahim positions his relationship with his mother. This account also reinforces how a wife is positioned within marriage, and how a mother continues to exercise control over her son after marriage as part of the importance of blood ties and family connectiveness over marital ties (Deeb 2006: 30; Joseph 1994: 55).



## Conclusion

This article argues that analysis of gendered power struggles should go beyond the typical male-female power dynamic. The article explores how women grapple for power within a patriarchal system, including through competitiveness, *kayd*, and even violence. It draws on accounts, largely from Syrian women, to show how mothers-in-law might exercise power over childcare, housing, mobility, work, and finances, pointing particularly to how living in close proximity amplifies the control exercised by older women over younger women. Building on the work of Rabho (2015) and Kandiyoti (1988), these findings challenge humanitarian agency assumptions of ‘imagined harmony’ among women (Cornwall and Rivas 2015: 407) or the notion that gendered power struggles by default involve men. In focusing on problems like gender-based violence and the need to ‘empower’ women, humanitarian policy-makers have unintentionally perpetuated the idea of women as always weak and perpetually vulnerable, which leads to a particular set of ‘evidence-based’ interventions. This article highlights that such generalisations and assumptions oversimplify the power struggles women may engage in. The findings of this article situate mother-in-law and daughter-in-law dynamics within broader family ties of relationality (Joseph 1999), including mother-son dynamics (Kandiyoti 1988) and the role of the sister-in-law. It illustrates that love within blood ties may sometimes be stronger than marital ties (Meriwether 1990: 111; Zbeidy 2020: 145) causing a husband to turn against his wife in favour of his sisters and mother. This article also highlights that power hierarchies are not forever fixed: daughters-in-law may resist the influence of mothers-in-law in subtle ways.

These findings have important implications for policy-makers and gender practitioners. The findings suggest that intersectional analysis must go beyond merely identifying areas of vulnerability (such as analysing gender and age to explain how adolescent girls have greater needs), but also highlight examples where the intersection of gender and age might privilege older women. Such focus might result in interventions being targeted not only by gender but also by age group, with specific messages tailored for older women. The findings also disrupt narratives that older women are less open to change or that they are satisfied with gender norms that subordinate women, highlighting opportunities for norm change among older women while highlighting how these older women are already using power. This article also demonstrates how power dynamics between women may play out over a lifetime, including how men may become pawns in power struggles among women. This framing of women’s power goes beyond the male-female dichotomy. It suggests power is not static but evolves over time, which has implications for intervention development and research among Syrians.

This article suggests that humanitarian agencies need to reframe interventions to reflect more careful consideration of intersectionality and broaden

how power is understood (Allen 1998). This might mean exploring how women might use power, as well as violence—traditionally framed as a male tool of oppression—against other women. Further research should explore how women grapple for power within patriarchal systems that are stacked against them.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my PhD supervisor Nade Al-Ali for her feedback on the PhD chapter upon which this article is based. I would also like to thank Ann-Christin Zuntz and Leah Kenny for their feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. This research was funded in part by the Lionel Murphy Foundation.

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