

Program of Study

Syrian Refugee Brides: Sisters, Victims or Agents? An Exploration of Syrian Women's Survival Mechanisms

Context and Research Question: The Syrian refugee crisis has produced over four million displaced people, 23% of whom are women between the ages of 18 and 59. As of July 2015, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) confirmed over 130,000 registered Syrian refugees in Egypt alone (UNHCR, 2015b). Fleeing one of the worst humanitarian crises since World War II, Syrians, whose influx peaked in 2013, arrived in an economically troubled country to face a lack of opportunities and a high cost of living. Several Syrian women have drawn the attention of the media, religious leaders, and advocacy groups because they married Egyptian men they barely knew. A significant number of these marriages were organized through religious groups and via social media (Geha, 2013). My doctoral research focuses on the social repercussions and densely gendered structure of the current global refugee crisis. In particular, through a focus on how Syrian women refugees understand their decisions to marry Egyptian men, I examine the context, dynamics and motives of such relationships to reveal the interplay between two concepts that could explain them: agency and victimhood.

Scope: Different political and social actors in Egypt have constructed this trend of Syrian refugee women marrying Egyptian men in different ways. For instance, women's groups, both international and Egyptian, defined these women as victims; while many men, who consider themselves too poor to marry an Egyptian woman saw the situation as an opportunity, viewing the "Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry". Alternatively, some religious preachers encouraged Egyptian men to marry Syrian refugee women as a form of *Jihad* (here meaning spiritual struggle to be better Muslims through aiding Muslim sisters) (Youssef, & Ismail, 2013). The chief question this project explores is *how do these Syrian refugee women view these marriages? Can this phenomenon be viewed as a survival strategy and an act of agency, or are the women, in fact, victims of exploitation in a situation created by both a humanitarian crisis and a patriarchal society that leaves them with no other choice but to marry?* I will use post-structural and post-colonial feminist theories (for instance, Alcoff, 1988; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003) to critically analyze the complexity of this phenomenon and to challenge normative liberal assumptions, especially those that portray Middle Eastern women as either passive, oppressed or deceived (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Thus, a central objective is to use this case to revisit the concepts of survival, victimhood, and agency, significant flashpoints in recent feminist debates, that are in urgent need of more nuanced, empirical analysis, particularly from life worlds outside the "West."

Methodology: Given the sensitive nature of my investigation, the study will use a snowball technique to access close and trusted social networks, mostly in the greater Cairo area (where a visible Syrian population resides) to conduct 30 semi-structured interviews. Half of the interviews will be conducted with Syrian refugee women who have married Egyptian men after 2012 (when Syrian refugees first arrived in Egypt). The other half of the interviews will seek different parties involved in the phenomenon, including women's advocacy groups, religious groups, husbands and families. The objective is to explore the different interpretations of these marriages and the respondents' views on concepts like refuge, refugee, *Jihad*, exploitation, social support and cohabitation. The data will be analyzed using different strategies of narrative analysis that identify implicit and explicit cues showing where the respondent's sense of identity, agency and responsibility lie and to reveal important aspects of gender relations and discursive practices.

Contribution: Feminist and post-colonial literature on gender and forced migration has witnessed a shift in the past two decades. In the eighties, women were seen as victims and a greater burden than men in countries of asylum. A focus on the vulnerability of women foreclosed the possibility of explorations of agency and multiple identities of female refugees (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, et. al, eds., 2008; Raven-Roberts, 2012). However, analyses of the Mama Maquin case, an organization run by Guatemalan female refugees in Mexico, that portrayed them as empowered and active agents, marked a shift in the literature (Giles, et. al, eds., 1996; Krznaric, 1997; Ronald, 2012). Similarly, debates surrounding agency and victimhood were explored in other relationships such as mail-order brides (Kojima,2001; Chun,1996), arranged marriage (Allendorfa & Ghimireb, 2013) and sex trafficking (Andrijasevic,2010; Sharma,2005). However, to date, the practice of Syrian refugees marrying Egyptian men has not received scholarly attention. Thus, this project will contribute to scholarly debates in three dimensions. First, motivated by post-secular feminist attempts, like Mahmood's (2005) and Butler's (2000), the research will offer critical analysis of concepts like subjectivity, norms and empowerment. Thus, it will consolidate efforts to understand female agency and victimization in contexts of forced migration. Second, refugees in the global South have received very little attention in forced migration studies, even though 86% of the world's refugees live in the global South (UNHCR, 2015a). Through a focus on Syrian refugees in Egypt, the project seeks to address some of the limitations of the current literature and draw attention to the different challenges and opportunities of resettlement and integration in the "Third World" as compared to the "West." Finally, despite some media attention, there is little socio-demographic data on such refugee marriages. It is my hope that I can gather some socio-demographic data that is otherwise unavailable

Qualifications: As an Egyptian Muslim female who is born and raised in the Middle East, I have both the linguistic and cultural fluency necessary to conduct this project and articulate it with deeper complexity. More importantly, my strong connections to diverse Cairenes' social circles will facilitate access to the women and other respondents I seek to interview. Moreover, my previous scholarly achievements (my BA in Political Science from Cairo University and my MA in International Human Rights Law from the American University in Cairo, where I was also nominated to participate in an exchange program at Cornell law school in New York) along with my extensive work experience with feminist and minority advocacy groups in the Middle East (Nazra for Feminist Studies and Minority Rights Group, International respectively) have prepared me to undertake a study of this nature.

Plan and Choice of School: I will complete my coursework by April 2016, my comprehensive examinations by April 2017, and my dissertation (on schedule) by Fall 2019. My coursework and exams will focus on feminist theories, women and gender in the Middle East, postcolonial studies, and analysis of forced migration. I am working under the supervision of Radhika Mongia, an expert in postcolonial, feminist and migration studies, Winona Giles, a prominent scholar of gender, refugee and forced migration studies, and Ann Kim, a specialist in survey methods and migration studies. In addition to the expertise of these scholars, I am fortunate to have access to the Centre for Refugee Studies (CRS) and the Center for Feminist Research (CFR) at York University. These institutional sites offer numerous opportunities for participation in conferences, avenues for publication, and rich resources for engaging with the work of other scholars. I also look forward to sharing the results of my research and collaborating with international and national organizations working with Syrian refugees in Egypt, especially the UNHCR regional office in Cairo and African and Middle Eastern Refugee Assistance in Egypt (AMERA-Egypt), that will provide guidelines and recommendations for policy makers and community groups with regard to access to basic rights, awareness of sexual/gender-based violence among both refugees and the host society, and gender empowerment. I am confident that with your funding, my work will further the academic understanding of the diverse female refugees' resettlement experiences and contribute to a better response to gender empowerment in forced migration settings.

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