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“LIKE A TREE WITHOUT LEAVES”: SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN AND THE SHIFTING MEANING OF MARRIAGE

Abstract

There is a growing body of feminist scholarship that highlights aspects of agency and empowerment of the refugee woman, mostly through citing examples of women challenging patriarchy and cultural norms. Extending the latter, I use a decolonizing framework to examine how refugee women strive for autonomy and empowerment through *accepting* those norms and *utilizing* them strategically. In doing so, I reveal a more complex relationship between agency and victimhood and how they relate to other notions such as empowerment, vulnerability and traditional gender roles. I use the case of Syrian refugee women who marry *for refuge* to explore how their stories challenge Western liberal feminist views that often stigmatize similar arrangements as exploitation, sex trafficking, and/or forced marriages. The narratives of those women move beyond highlighting instances of agency, resistance, and empowerment as subversion to question the Eurocentric conceptualization of such notions. The objective of this study is three-fold: (a) reporting on and giving context to an under-research phenomenon such as marriage for refuge; (b) rethinking and challenging liberal feminist understanding of concepts such as agency, empowerment, traditional gender roles, and marriage; and (c) making the case for the potential contribution a decolonizing approach could bring to refugee research.



Egypt is host to over five million refugees, including 500,000 Syrian refugees living in the country since 2012. Most of those refugees are not included in the official UNHCR statistics, which only verify 119,665 registered Syrian refugees.² Syrians arrived to an economically troubled country and a politically polarized atmosphere, where they faced a lack of opportunities and a high cost of living. The phenomenon of Syrian women marrying Egyptian men whom they barely knew soon upon arrival has drawn the attention of media and advocacy groups. Such marriages have been facilitated and encouraged through different channels including marriage brokers, social media, and religious groups.³ Social media campaigns such as *Ljiaat la Sabaya*⁴ or *Dina Taha* is a PhD candidate at the Sociology department at York University and a graduate affiliate with the Center for Refugee Studies.

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“Refugees not spoils of war” were ignited as a reaction to this practice in Egypt, as well as Lebanon, Jordan, and other Arab countries where such marriages have been facilitated, encouraged, and organized through different channels including marriage brokers, social media, and religious organizations.

Feminist literature studying gender and forced migration has witnessed a big shift over the past three decades. In the 1980s, women were mostly conceptualized as victims (generally of gender violence) and a greater burden than men in countries of asylum. During this period, some scholarship viewed them as *victimized* and not victims *per se* through questioning the power relations and the complex gender, social, economic, and political realities.⁵ Focus on women and victimhood foreclosed the possibility of explorations of agency and multiple identities of women refugees.⁶ By the beginning of the 1990s, academic discourse emphasized women’s agency and highlighted the different roles they played to mobilize or keep their families together, thus shifting the language from victimhood to resistance, survival, and empowerment. For example, the portrayal of the Mama Maquin case, an organization run by Guatemalan women refugees in Mexico, viewed them as empowered and active agents, crystalizing the debate around the theme: “victims of war *and* agents of change.”⁷ Such discourse often portrayed refugeeness as including an opportunity for emancipation and agency.

The contribution of Feminist scholarship in challenging hegemonic discourses and understanding how power relations shape the gendered refugeeness is undeniable, it is not without shortcomings, nonetheless. As Shirin Razack argued it is very common when adopting a “Western” Feminist worldview, with its cultural and historical specificity, to fall into “cultural deficit explanations” when attempting to understand and explain the non-Western women’s experiences describing them often as “overly patriarchal and inherently uncivilised.”⁸ Thus, while it is important to recognize the influence of Patriarchy on shaping our worldviews (especially around global movement and migration) and on our perception to gender roles and agency, it is as important to recognize the role of factors such as colonialism and orientalism and their impact on the very creation of these concepts and worldviews.

Thus, while many scholarships have sought to highlight aspects of agency and empowerment of the refugee woman, mostly through citing examples of women challenging patriarchy and cultural norms, I use a decolonizing framework to examine how refugee women strive

for autonomy through *accepting* those norms and *utilizing* them strategically. In doing so, I reveal a more complex relationship between agency and victimhood and how they relate to other notions such as empowerment, vulnerability, and traditional gender roles. Here, I am not just referring to highlighting the contextual nature of agency and victimhood and their-frequent-concomitant relationship, I also propose an understanding (and an embodiment) of notions such as agency, empowerment, and resistance that challenge liberal feminist perceptions.⁹ In particular, I use the case of Syrian refugee women who marry *for refuge* to explore how their stories challenge Western liberal feminist view that often stigmatize similar arrangements as exploitation, sex trafficking, and/or forced marriages. The narratives of those women reveal the shortcomings of the “agents not victims” body of literature and moves beyond highlighting instances of agency, resistance, and empowerment to questioning the meanings of such notions and highlight the colonized perception that has dominated their definitions. In sum, through this case study I highlight: (a) the importance of recognizing that agency and victimhood are social constructs, (b) the shortcomings of “universalizing the empowerment experience”¹⁰ and strategies of resistance and self-reliance and (c) the malleable and strategic understanding and utilization of (traditional) gendered identities among refugee women. In doing so, I propose that a theoretical de-coupling of notions such as agency and resistance, empowerment and independence, and vulnerability and victimhood are essential for more nuanced understanding of the (non-Western) gendered refugee experience.

The discussion below subjects to questions such as: how do Syrian refugee women interpret their decisions to marry Egyptian nationals? How their forced migration and displacement experiences have (re)shaped their perception to the meaning, purpose, and form of marriage? How can a decolonizing feminist perspective further our understanding of their decisions, experiences, interpretations, and subjectivities? And finally, how can this case study demonstrate the complexity in the relationship between notions such as victimhood, vulnerability, precarity, autonomy, and agency? Thus, the objective of this study is three-fold: (a) reporting on and giving context to an under-research phenomenon such as marriage for refuge; (b) rethinking and challenging liberal feminist understanding of concepts such as agency, empowerment, gender roles, and marriage; and (c) making the case for the potential contribution a decolonizing approach could add to

refugee research and understanding the (often) non-Western experiences of forced migrants.

I start by identifying the methods and the theoretical framework followed by a brief background about the case study. I then highlight a few emerging themes from my respondents' narratives to trace the shifting meanings of marriage due to their displacement. I conclude by pinpointing some conceptual challenges that my respondents' narratives have imposed on notions central to liberal feminism namely: agency, marriage, and victimhood.

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is part of a broader study that I conducted in Egypt during the summer of 2017 where I interviewed Syrian refugee women who escaped the conflict in Syria and married Egyptian men after 2011 once they settled in Egypt. The data was collected over the course of four months in Egypt, including the greater Cairo area and Alexandria, the two areas with the highest concentration of Syrians. I have relied on personal connections, snowballing, social media, as well as perseverance in getting in touch with key informants to access my sample. In the sample, I was cautious to represent all socio-economic levels. Thirty in-depth qualitative interviews were completed with Syrian women who are currently married or were married to Egyptian men. In addition, ten interviews were conducted with Egyptian husbands of women from my original sample. In this paper, I focus on the narratives of six Syrian refugee women. While their narratives cannot be used to draw general conclusions about the entire sample, the narrow selection of cases here is intended for two reasons: (a) to emphasize that the objective is *not* to draw general conclusions but to highlight variations within Syrian refugee women and refugee women at large; and (b) informed by a decolonizing approach, this paper aims to allow a relatively larger space/platform for those women, and their stories. In other words, by offering "more pages" to their voices and stories, the aim is to minimize viewing my respondents as mere numbers or simply the "Other."

Scholars such as Homi Bhabha introduce decolonizing critiques¹¹ as an academic attempt to recognize the inequality of ontological and epistemological explanations and cultural representations caused by the Western political and social "authority" of what is referred to as the modern world order. Such authority has created "ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic 'normality'"

when trying to understand non-Western cultures.¹² To build on that, Spivak developed a research strategy called “unlearning of one’s privilege as one’s loss,”¹³ referring to the unlearning means, or in her words “stopping oneself from always wanting to correct, teach, theorize, develop, colonize, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten; the impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination.”¹⁴ This “learning to unlearn in order to relearn”¹⁵ approach is at the core of decolonizing research to challenge Eurocentric worldviews and knowledge production that are the result of centuries of colonization. In particular, through challenging seemingly absolute notions such as emancipation, empowerment, and victimhood to be, in fact, socially constructed, an anti-colonial lens can advance our understanding of the factors shaping identities and subjectivities. Moreover, anti-colonial theory questions the “either or” relationship between notions such as privilege/disadvantage, oppression/emancipation, empowerment/exploitation, and agency/victimhood.

Along the same lines, and since a major objective of this decolonizing attempt is to listen to the accounts of the participants as “experts” on, and not “witnesses” to, their contexts, a qualitative approach was selected as it tends to give a face to the “data.” As argued by Hopkins, qualitative research can politicize the personal and brings life to the subject studied.¹⁶ As such, in-depth qualitative interviews are particularly helpful with marginalized groups who often need more space to be able to recall their memories and express themselves.¹⁷ In my analysis I have utilized a number of strategies drawn from narrative analysis and discourse analysis to identify implicit and explicit cues to explore how the respondents experience this social context, where their sense of subjectivities, agency, and responsibility lie, and how gender relations and discursive practices are linked. Moreover, I relied on discourse analysis to highlight how power and hegemonic discourses shape accounts and perceptions and hence rank some ways of knowing as more valid than other. Which brings me to the question of trust, power, and positionality.

As an Egyptian Muslim woman born and raised in the Middle East, my linguistic and cultural fluency, have offered me ease of access to my respondents. This still, however, leaves out the question of trust and my insider-outsider position. Being of a similar religious, ethnic, and linguistic background as most of the participants might facilitate communication and build rapport faster than someone with a different

background. However, the latter could also be a reason for suspicion or fear of judgement, as participants will likely expect me to be aware of common cultural and religious traditions and restrictions that they may not have been able to uphold. Similarly, the fact that I have a family and children might be common ground on which to build rapport and cultivate a safe space where the participants feel that I relate to their concerns and responsibilities. On the other hand, other factors, most important of which is the fact that I am not a refugee, as well as my socio-economic class and being from the academic ivory tower, and the fact that I live and am being educated in a Western context might create a gap between myself and the participants. Such gap could be sensed whether in terms of rapport building or in terms of communication and understanding the conveyed meanings by both sides. Hence, they could, for instance, understand the meanings behind the interview questions in a way different than what was intended by the interviewer.¹⁸ Thus, a central question that I am still grappling with is: As an immigrant from a visible minority and a female researcher, who is returning *home* equipped with “Western” education, can I legitimately represent subaltern voices? And do I really have the authority to communicate my participants’ voices and their interpretations of their experiences without distortion? I sought to respond to these questions through performing constant reflexivity on my position and my engagement with my respondents as will show in some of the examples I give.

Finally, while one of the objectives here is to *not* separate the theoretical and methodological frameworks, I would like to point out a few theoretical remarks. An objective here is to understand women refugees’ subjectivities and experiences in ways that go beyond Eurocentric and Orientalist modes of representation. I use the work of scholars that are not decolonizing theorists *per se* such as Saba Mahmood and Judith Butler to revisit notions commonly used to understand refugee women’s experiences. By that I aim to bring attention to what Chandra Talpade Mohanty referred to as “the epistemic privilege” of Third World women¹⁹ to the study of forced migration. In other words, by exploring critiques of notions such as agency, empowerment, emancipation, oppression, and victimhood, I attempt to find a space for decolonizing paradigms in forced migration studies in a way that could further the understanding of women’s refugeehood. By situating their accounts at the center of the project and positioning them as experts, I aim to highlight how anticolonial

methodological and theoretical insights could contribute to decolonizing methodology as well as refugee research.

MARRIAGE FOR REFUGE: CONTEXT AND THEMES

Most of the female respondents I have interviewed claimed that shortly after arriving to Egypt, and regardless of their marital status (divorced, widowed, single mother, or never been married), they were bombarded with marriage proposals from Egyptian men from different social classes. Informants characterized many of these marriages as (1) Quick, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal; (2) Polygamous, where the man already has a wife and is seeking a second wife; (3) Customary or *Urfi* marriages, that are limited to the religious ceremony and hence are not registered with official paperwork. When asked to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men are seeking to marry Syrian refugee women in particular, almost all of the women made reference to the reputation of Syrian women in terms of physical beauty, femininity, self-care, and high quality as housewives (compared to Egyptian women). However, some of the Egyptian husbands interviewed also complained about the financial burden of getting married to an Egyptian woman including ongoing and increasing requests for material support from her family they said would likely follow. Some of the men said that with limited financial resources, they have a better chance of finding a “higher quality” Syrian partner (they made reference to intellectual and social class qualities) who might have fewer options to choose from compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

These results seem to reinforce the exploitation narrative that is assumed by several advocacy groups and social media campaigns, which boils down the Egyptian man’s motivations behind such marriages to the idea that, Syrian refugees are “cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry.”²⁰ However, below I propose a more nuanced analysis that goes beyond a simplistic understanding of gendered relations and instead focuses on how displacement has reshaped these women’s perceptions of the notion of marriage itself. I propose a deeper understanding of the complexity of these marriages and for a more thorough analysis of the nature and level of autonomy exercised by those refugee women. In the sections below, I will focus on three main themes that emerged from my interviews with my six respondents. I show how a decolonizing framework can help view such marriages as a tool for survival, empowerment, and self-reliance, an argument that challenges the reducing exploitation and victimhood

discourses about Syrian refugee “brides.” While the study still accounts for instances of exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), it also reveals how elements of agency and victimhood, are not just concomitant but also intertwine and co-exist in some of those women’s stories—for instance in the case of marriage immobility as will be elaborated. In particular, I demonstrate how displacement has expanded those women’s reasons and motivations for marriage to include legal, social, and economic motivations. I also illustrate how displacement and refugeeness have dismantled some cultural taboos surrounding certain unconventional matrimonial relations such as *Urfi* marriage, how notions such as *Sotra* have challenged norms of intimacy and nuclear family, and how their decisions to marry reflect an awareness of their current social position and vulnerabilities thus perceiving marriage, even if not necessarily a happy one, as an appropriate survival strategy—for them and their children.

I. MARRIAGE AS AN OPPORTUNITY

Almost all of the refugee women I have met have referred to marriage to an Egyptian man at some point during the interview as a social, economic, and/or a legal survival tool. A few women have explicitly referred to marriage as a legal solution, i.e. to secure a legal residency status for them and their children, which is particularly useful in the unpredictable Egyptian political environment. However, a more significant number of those women had mostly social and economic justifications and motivations behind the marriage. Especially that there are other strategies they can follow to obtain a legal or a semi-legal status such as enrolling their children in college or renewing their tourist visa every few months.

Many of the respondents have commonly referred to marriage as *Sotra*, an Arabic word literally meaning “to cover” that is used often to mean protection or sheltering. This should not be regarded as an indicator of the lack of affection and companionship in these marriages. Rather, marriage in such cases often served a dual purpose of intimacy and protection. In this sense, marriage functioned as a tool for economic support by providing financial security to the household. Furthermore, it offered protection from other social pressures including attempts to take advantage of these women due to their uprootedness and inability to maneuver the culture and day-to-day interactions. This included protection particularly against sexual harassment. For instance, when asked about the meaning of *Sotra*, *Marwa*, a widow in her early thirties with two children, who is

currently a second wife to an Egyptian man, said: “In my opinion, *Sotra* means a man. . . when you say: ‘that’s it!’ no one is going to harass me, no one is going to impose themselves on me. That’s it! I am with this man and so I can rest mentally.” *Maha*, a forty-five-year old divorced woman who comes from a well-off family in Syria, agreed with *Marwa*. Despite her financial stability, *Maha* still felt the importance of getting married upon arrival to Egypt and compared a woman without a husband to “a tree without leaves.” *Marwa*, on the other hand was in a less stable economic situation. Unlike many Syrian women, she didn’t lack the working experience or reject the idea of working to support herself and her kids. In fact, she met her husband because she was searching for a job. She has proven both resilience and skills in acquiring jobs and expressed deep satisfaction with her “printer, computer and very nice office.” However, challenging the liberal feminist rhetoric, when given the option, *Marwa* still preferred marriage over working. Her husband gave her the choice between *Sotra* (here implying *Sotra* through marriage) and financial support through giving a monthly allowance to the kids and she picked the first without hesitation.

These women’s narratives reflected a strong awareness of their social position, and the social risks and restrictions that face them. Such restrictions are often a product of their gender, their nationality, their displacement, and being in a foreign country where they lack social capital and cultural maneuverability. That said, they were also able to identify options that suited their interest and made the best out of their situation. For instance, *Nour*, a twenty-five-year-old widow, also challenged the liberal feminist rhetoric by expressing her conviction that a woman’s “natural path is to eventually get married.” Despite her young age, her negative experience and feeling of being used by her ex-husband who married her in secret just to leave her after four months to go back to his first wife and children, *Nour* still demonstrated a sense of autonomy and responsibility in both her decision to marry soon after arriving to Egypt and her desire (and confidence) to remarry again after the failure of the first attempt. Rather, her refugeeeness seemed to have turned what she had already seen as her natural path, into a solution, an opportunity, and even an advantage because of her gender and ethnicity. Such advantage is not available to other social groups who seek asylum in Egypt, for example many sub-Saharan refugee groups such as Sudanese, Eritreans, and Somalis²¹ who are often racialized and more culturally isolated than Syrian refugees in Egypt.²²

Based on *Nour's* rationale, other solutions like working as a hairdresser, which was her job before she married her first Syrian husband, would keep her away from her daughter during the work day and expose her to a relatively foreign culture, thus making her prone to exploitation and "humiliation." For her, marriage, even if in secret and even as a second wife, was the safe or "decent," if not the obvious, option in her situation, especially given that she set her priorities in relation to her only child.

D: Oh so you mean you don't care if you are a first or a second wife as long as your daughter is with you?

N: Yes dear. Excuse me but for women like us we don't think about ourselves, we think about our children. When you buy anything for the house do you think of yourself or your son? [. . .] In my country, I had my rights and I was able to manage. Here I am in a strange country. Why would I work and degrade myself, meet this and meet that, the good and the bad? No, I apply *Sotra* to myself and my daughter and find a human being who is honest and straightforward and offers me a decent life. I'm not saying that I want a car and a big house. Middle ground. A decent life. . . . (interview with *Nour*, summer 2017).

The trajectories of *Maha*, *Marwa*, and *Nour*, despite the common label of *Sotra*, undeniably, had to do a lot with the man/husband's circumstances, as well as his understanding of and reasons behind the marriage. In *Maha's* case, both the husband and the wife were honest with each other about their intentions and need for intimacy. In such case, *Sotra* served as a bonus that reinforced a second marriage against a resisting first wife and have potentially worked as a social justification for the husband who was a public figure. In *Nour's* case, while it is hard to speculate the ex-husband's real intentions, *Sotra* and religious oblation were not a strong enough reason for the marriage to survive. The husband's theoretical and moral understanding of *Sotra* marriage and his attempt to apply it seemed to have clashed with his "other" social life and probably conflicted, in his mind, with modernist social dictations of the nuclear monogamous family. In *Marwa's* case, on the other hand, *Sotra* was the glue that kept the marriage together thus far. The husband's clear vision of marrying her for the sake of her orphaned children played a major role in giving both the husband and

the wife a reason to keep going, despite all the problems as *Marwa* clarified. It was even a reason for *Marwa* to fall in love with her husband later on in the marriage and for him to hold on to this marriage despite his first wife's constant call for divorce.

II. MANEUVERING THE SYSTEM AND THE SHIFTING MEANING OF MARRIAGE

In addition to serving as an opportunity in the context of displacement, marriage itself, its meaning and how and when it could take place, has also been reshaped by those women's forced migration experiences. During the interviews, the women were asked if they would marry their current husbands had their circumstances been different in terms of the war and displacement (i.e. would they have married the same person if they were still back in Syria). Some women affirmed enthusiastically that they would have still married the man in question, while others hesitantly suggested that the limited options they had as refugees were decisive in choosing that particular man as husband.

Interestingly, some of the respondents, mostly middle-aged women, expressed that they would likely not have seen remarriage after divorce, or the death of the husband had they stayed in Syria. There were two main reasons behind this assessment. First, cultural and social restrictions would have required many of the women to leave their children with their parents if they were to re-marry. Similarly, many expressed that they would have been afraid of bringing in a step-father into the lives of their children, concerned that the children would have been treated unfairly, even if the children were allowed to stay with the mother in the remarriage situation. Another cultural restriction was the idea that after a certain age, and especially if the woman has children (dependent or not), remarriage is frowned upon in many Syrian social spheres (as it is in many other Arab communities). Remarriage is often viewed as the betrayal of the sacred role of Mother.

A second reason had to do with the social support that many of these women enjoyed back in Syria. Such support and being surrounded with family and friends which provided them with social capital and security have substituted the need for a male figure whom they justified marrying to fill this gap. Moreover, the need to fill this gap is intensified by their new status as uprooted refugees. *Naziha*, a forty-five-year old divorced woman who is currently happily married to an Egyptian man who is five years younger than her, which is not common in either the Syrian or Egyptian cultures, dismissed the idea

of marrying if she were back in Syria: “I would be among my family and my people. . . I would have more than one man to take care of me.” For her, “wifhood,” or marriage, was a way to compensate for the lost motherhood status. Moreover, displacement has reshaped her perception to marriage. On the one hand, it dismantled some structural boundaries surrounding marriage (and remarriage) by removing some of taboos surrounding if and when a “Mother” could remarry. On the other hand, it (re)labelled marriage as a “decent” or even the *only* solution to her new situation.

More importantly, one can identify a central theme in my respondents’ narratives (*Naziha* here, *Maha*, *Marwa*, and *Nour* in the previous section, and *Mohra* and *Shirin* as we will see in the following section). All their narratives go back to the idea of Motherhood. A major reason why they chose marriage was because they viewed it as their motherly duty. For them, they found empowerment *in* and *because of* motherhood. In addition to giving those women a sense of purpose and a motivation to survive and adapt, it often also gives them social status. By decolonizing the perception to traditional gender roles and “avenues” to empowerment, we can see how the motherhood status can be perceived by the woman herself as well as the members of her community as more important than socioeconomic or educational accomplishments,²³ it can offer a woman an elevated status among her community that comes with a strong social network and respect among her community.

Going back to the idea of the strategic utilization of traditional gender roles, I argue that a central reason that contributed to reshaping those women’s perception to marriage is their need (as well as their creativity and resourcefulness) to manipulate many cultural and legal rules in order to secure a better social and economic position for themselves and their children. For instance, unlike their preference if they were back in Syria, some women have admitted that they preferred, in fact insisted, to keep their marriage unofficial or unregistered (with the government), i.e. *Urfi* marriage, which is limited to a private religious ceremony. Thus, while many women sought to register their marriages to preserve both their legal status in the country and their marital rights, some women preferred the “precarious” status created by the *Urfi* or customary marriage. They justified their choice in several ways. First, some women, like *Naziha*, said that marrying an Egyptian would entail the woman losing the legal refugee status with the UNHCR. Thus, by not disclosing the marriage, she can keep the yellow refugee card that proves her legal

refugee status keeping her eligible for humanitarian financial assistance and food rations for themselves and their children. Second, by not registering their marriage with the Egyptian government, they hold onto a higher level of autonomy if they later come to the decision that the marriage is a mistake, or if they later chose to leave the country or wanted to go back to Syria. A customary marriage simplifies the separation process and gives the woman more control over it especially in terms of proving a single marital status outside of Egypt at a later date.

A third reason for preferring an *Urfi* marriage is that it makes a second marriage easier and more discrete (i.e. secret or unannounced). While polygamy is practiced with varying degrees in different Muslim societies and in specific sub-cultures and social classes, monogamous relationships and the nuclear family are still the most commonly accepted form in most Egyptian communities. Many Egyptian wives would resist the idea of bringing in a "sister wife." When the first wife of *Marwa's* husband asked her, after the marriage secret was revealed: "didn't you consider me? What would happen to me when my husband marries a second wife?" She simply replied: "No, to be honest, I didn't consider you." Thus, an *Urfi* discrete marriage offers the woman the economic and social benefits (at least within her social circle or neighborhood) while avoiding both: the frequently stigmatized status surrounding the second wife as well as the probable fight and rivalry she would have to put on with the first wife. A fight that she is not necessarily guaranteed to win. In such case, keeping a "precarious" status, paradoxically, offers her more stability.

A final group of women justified, not just their approval, but their preference to be second wives, regardless of whether the marriage is official or not, because many of them arrived in Egypt as single mothers after a deceased husband or a divorce and many did not want to be a "full-time" wife which might distract her from her children. Being a second wife means that she only has a "part-time" husband who splits his time between two wives and two households (or more in very rare cases), allowing her more time to her children. That is to say, the meaning of marriage, along with if, how, and when it takes place has been repurposed to serve those women new situation. Again, dismantling many social restrictions and boundaries that existed back home and allowing for new interpretations and options that were created due to their new social position as forced migrants.

III. DOUBLE PRECARIETY AND MARRIAGE IMMOBILITY

Marriage as a tool for mitigating insecurity and precarity is not a novel practice to Syrian women, nor for Bosnians, Iraqis and others before them in situations of forced migration. For instance, studies on Tsunami survivors²⁴ and North-Korean female border crossers to China,²⁵ elaborate interesting aspects of marriage as a response to displacement. The aim here, however, is not to undermine gender-based violence and oppression that, particularly, refugee women are exposed to what I refer to as double precarity. Such double precarity is the result of two elements: their gendered uprootedness and the loss of their family and social support as well as precarity resulting from the marriage itself.

During my interviews, I was exposed to many women who were left in a more precarious situation than before the marriage. For women refugees, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a particular threat. The latter is not just limited to physical violence but includes psychological and emotional abuse as well.²⁶ As a result, many refugee women suffer from mental health symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.²⁷ For many women, marriage is the only alternative to homelessness or deportation in Egypt, thus, despite suffering from an abusive relationship, or even just an unhappy marriage due to factors such as incompatibility, marrying based on what is available, romantic void, or feeling of unfairness resulting, for instance, from a first marriage or the secrecy of marriage, some refugee women will still choose or feel obliged to stay in that marriage.²⁸ Recalling the decolonizing lens and emphasizing its rejection to either-or categories, those women are neither in a forced nor voluntary marriage. They experience “marriage immobility,” a term I coin to refer to this in-betweenness of marriage status, neither forced nor voluntary.

That’s to say, among my respondents some women, despite marrying voluntarily, are forced to stay in the marriage and in the country for reasons beyond mental health. *Mohra*, a twenty-six-year-old Syrian mother of two who was lured to Egypt by an Egyptian man who offered to marry her and take her and her kids out of a war-burdened Syria is a perfect example. *Mohra*, married her husband by mailing him a power of attorney where he used to legalize the marriage in Egypt. She travelled to him alone, hoping her kids would follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social and economic situation he was living in. Although her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival, after giving birth to her “Egyptian” daughter, she

is now forced to make a choice between leaving her Egyptian children behind or suffering along with her Syrian children in Egypt every day.

Shirin, in her late twenties, is another case who, after weighing the risks and benefits of her situation, is also stuck in her marriage. During the interview, she painted a picture that she is happily married only to call me a few days later to confess that she lied because she was worried her husband was listening. Although she did not refer to physical abuse, she did mention she was kicked out of the house and had to sleep in the street more than once. She contacted me hoping for legal guidance to explore options that would help her gain financial independence. She was mostly thinking about financial aid, not work, since she too has a child from her Egyptian husband which complicates her options (of leaving the marriage as well as leaving the country). For her, and similar to *Nour* in the previous section, paid work is not an option because she would have to spend her income on daycare and even if she was able to find a job that could help her afford daycare, she might not be able bear the harassment of her husband's family. She mentioned a few times her desire to flee the country and join her older children (from her previous Syrian husband) who risked their lives on a boat to seek asylum in Germany, but even that was not possible unless she is willing to leave her Egyptian toddler behind.

Both *Shirin* and *Mohra*, despite their resentfulness, showed very little will to leave their current husbands. After following up with them more than a year later, they are still with their husbands where there are "the normal ups and many downs" that has always described their marriages. They are in a status of "marriage immobility." While *Mohra* was adamant that eventually she will find a way to leave the country with *all* her kids and declared her lack of interest in remarrying despite her young age, *Shirin* who was not interested in working whatsoever hinted that a possible solution, or a way out of this immobility, is to leave her current husband for another one (she did not specify a nationality). Such a person might offer her protection from possible ex-husband harassment while also providing for her and her son financially.

I propose here that the notion of marriage immobility offers a useful analytical tool to understanding deeper layers of the gendered refugee experiences and better characterizes obstacles and causes of vulnerability. That is to say, by decolonizing the binary relation between forced and voluntary marriage and by capturing this in-betweenness state through using the notion of marriage immobility vis-a-vis forced marriage, we move towards generating an analytical

category that renders the lives, experiences and challenges facing some refugee women more visible. Such category, I argue, is more nuanced than the exploitation and “conventional” SGBV rhetoric that doesn’t necessarily capture all the elements that lead to such experience.

DISCUSSION

By now, I hope that the reader has grasped that my objective is not just a mere attempt to highlight relative acts of freedom and subtle challenges to norms by refugee women. While many of the cases above do prescribe to the above meaning of freedom and agency, in this case study, I sought to highlight the conceptual challenges many Syrian refugee women impose on notions central to liberal feminist analysis namely *agency*, *marriage*, and *victimhood*. Particularly, in this section, I demonstrate how a decolonizing lens can: (a) help offer new avenues for rethinking notions such as *agency* and related notions such as empowerment and resistance; (b) reimagine the dynamics and purpose of social arrangements such as *marriage* beyond intimacy and the nuclear family and makes the case for rejecting a universalized perception to human subjectivity; (c) demonstrate the usefulness of challenging binary categories to describe complex social phenomena such as *victimhood*, forced marriage and SGBV.

Agency. Agency in liberal (feminist) analysis is understood ultimately as resistance to forms of domination and the capacity to realize one’s own interest against custom.²⁹ Here, I would like to highlight some shortcomings of such definition. For instance, Bracke and Fadel use the case of the headscarves within European secular multiculturalism debates to showcase how the dominant discourse promotes a particular model of agency dominated by a language of rights. They question how such hegemonic liberal language leads to a narrow understanding of resistance and emancipation. Such narrow understanding necessarily informs a hegemonic meaning of agency, hence risks making the voices of Othered women as not so intelligible.³⁰ Similarly, referring back to the “agents not victims” body of work, a major limitation to this trend is that it necessarily assigns a *positive* understanding of agency and, in turn, a *negative* one of victimhood. Thus, as Gudrun Dahl posits: “it tells us that the value of the described people *depends* upon them being prepared to act, or on acting with an impact.”³¹ She argues that such understanding is a direct result of neoliberalism and individualism that are products of the Western experience.³² Dahl contends that the constant push to extract agency from victimhood effaces notions of deservingness in the face of

victimhood and can potentially produce a “blame the victim” discourse, at least for some groups. Thus, even when the “agents not victims” literature succeeds in recognizing the relationship of agency and victimhood as concomitant or not necessarily mutually exclusive,³³ the very repetition of the moral message that tries to persuade us that individuals are valued based on their ability to subvert, resist, and challenge is limited.

As mentioned earlier, decolonizing frameworks challenge the “othered” portrayal of Third World countries (from which most migrants and refugees often flee) as culturally backward and barbaric, and hence in a position where they “need saving.”³⁴ In this case study, challenging and decolonizing essentialized understandings of binaries such as victims or agents shows the importance of accepting such notions social constructs. With this in mind, the traces of Eurocentrism and hegemonic discourses can be seen when necessary associating agency with rationality and resistance to norms. What I tried to demonstrate through the case of Syrian refugee brides is that while a deeper look into those women’s testimonies reveals a strong congruence with the above understanding, especially regarding the pursuit of one’s interest, this understanding of the notion of agency captures only a thin layer of those Syrian refugee women’s experiences discussed above. In other words, restricting ourselves to such definition of agency sharply limits our understanding of those women’s subjectivities and experiences that were formed in and by non-Western liberal cultural elements.

If we take the example of *Sotra* marriage and viewing marriage as an opportunity, the stories above undeniably point to the major role the husband and his understanding of *Sotra* marriage play in determining the success of the marriage. That said, the women on the other hand demonstrated substantial control in making and calculating the initial decision to get married in the first place. Thus, for women like *Maha*, *Marwa*, and *Nour*, the decision to marry using the rationale of *Sotra* had its mitigating social pressures, some stemming from patriarchy and others stemming from the uprootedness and the forced migration status of those women. The women, still, were able to utilize relational autonomy³⁵ and agency – in its liberal sense – to pursue their interest. That was established for instance when *Marwa* simply replied to her husband’s first wife that she has not considered her [the first wife] when she was calculating the cost and benefit of this marriage.

A major fracture to this rhetoric, however, is that those women still prescribed themselves to the traditional marriage institution and

many patriarchal discourses. That was manifested in *Maha's* statement: "a woman without a man is like a tree without leaves," *Nour's* conviction that the woman's ultimate path is to get married, or *Marwa's* decision to choose marriage over just monthly financial support when given the option by her husband. Here, the notion of Subjectification is particularly useful. The post-structuralist Foucauldian concept of Subjectification, that was later taken by Judith Butler in her gender analysis, draws attention to power (and norms in Butler's analysis) as both subordinating and constraining or enabling. In other words, the modes that allow agency are in fact the products of power operations (they didn't exist before the dominance of this power). That's to say, an act of agency is necessarily a product of structure and discursive powers which we "depend on for our existence."³⁶ Personal preferences and gender roles are social constructs dictated to a large extent by culture, upbringing and other social forces. For instance, *Nour's* conviction that marriage is the natural path to any woman, has helped form her options and preferences and shaped her understanding of marriage as "the decent" option for her. It has also helped set her priorities when it comes to her obligations to her daughter as well as her understanding of love and intimacy.

Thus, while marriage can be argued as a practical, "decent," and a culturally relevant solution to many refugee women who are also single mothers, it cannot be viewed in isolation from other cultural norms and discursive powers that have shaped those women's consciousness. This is not to deny the patriarchal and unjust conditions, such as fear from harassment of distress about personal safety, that underlie those women's socio-cultural milieu and shape their preferences and decision to marry. Rather, I want to pick up on Saba Mahmood's argument which sought to problematize question that have dominated scholarship, such as: "how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?"³⁷ Here, I would like to re-emphasize the objective of this paper to challenge the assumption that desire to freedom from subordination is universal and innate to human nature.³⁸ I argue that the decision/desire to marry for those women is determined by a complex web shaped by: (a) explicit/liberal understanding of agency and weighing one's interest against custom; (b) patriarchal dictations that re-articulated marriage as the decent and almost the only solution; and (c) those women's moral agency. Such moral agency does not particularly aim to enhance one's material interest or status but rather to "attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom,

perfection, or immortality.”³⁹ In short, those women have perceived marriage as an agentive act not just in terms of promoting their socio-economic interest or to maneuver social structure but also as a moral and virtuous act that complements their existence and understanding of their gender (which in Butler’s words⁴⁰ should not be understood as having an inner core) and femininity.

Marriage. Another conceptual challenge that the narratives of those women have imposed on liberal scholarship is the reconceptualization of marriage. While not challenging the idea of marriage as an institution *per se*, many of the women have posed important question to some of the core principles of marriage as understood in a postmodern world. At the first glance, and consistent with the point made above about the multi-layered understanding and embodiment of agency, one could identify some pragmatic motives behind such challenges such as preferring and pursuing polygamous marriage for many reasons as discussed above and refusing to register the marriage officially and limiting it to a customary contract. However, beyond those pragmatic motives and throughout the narratives, one is able to trace malleable meanings of intimacy, romantic love, and the nuclear family which pose challenges to the simplistic explanations of gender inequality in non-Western, particularly in this case Islamic cultures.

For instance, despite her negative experience, *Nour* was actually pleased with her ex-husband’s interest in applying *Sotra* to a widow and her orphaned children. As a researcher, I was astonished from the fact that she would be happy that someone is marrying her almost out of charity at least in the apparent. She clarified that she appreciated his honesty and noble intention and she was convinced that love, an important factor still, is a gradual process that will come later. When I reflected back on my astonishment, I could trace elements of a colonized understanding of intimate relations that are often explained through convictions around the nuclear family as well as individualized perceptions, commercialized romantic expressions and monopolized affections. This malleable understanding of marriage and gender identity should not be understood merely in terms of strategic malleability, but that it also “emerges *because of* her traditionally ascribed gender identity not *despite of* it.”⁴¹ This understanding of marriage should ignite further exploration and analysis and requires not just postcolonial and gender analysis but a political economy lens as well.

Victimhood. So far, I have spent time arguing for reimagining the meanings of agency, strategic agency, and non-liberal agency to understand the cultural complexity of those women's consciousness and articulation of autonomy, marriage and gender roles. While many literatures have emerged to advocate for an agent-not-victim approach when studying gendered refugeeeness, denying the victimhood status entirely is fundamentally problematic, reduces the diverse experiences and stands paralyzed (or apologetic) against instances of exploitation and oppression that many women, particularly refugee women are subjected to—such as *Mohra*. Hence, I want to propose the usefulness of the concept of vulnerability instead of victimhood in capturing those women's multifaceted experiences and as an alternative to understanding power inequalities. Here I would like to draw attention to the work of Alyson Cole where she made the case to elaborate the neo-liberal influences that offer a narrow understanding of vulnerability limiting it to weakness and helplessness and conflating it with victimhood. Moreover, she argues that vulnerability offers a richer analytical framework and that “[b]y designating a condition rather than a status or identity, vulnerability allows for fluid permutations of degree and context, emphasizing changing temporalities and enduring interdependence.”⁴²

That is to say, the concept of vulnerability offers a solution to the shortcomings of an anti-victimhood discourse. More importantly, it offers space for a de-stigmatized understanding of victimhood which should be addressed “without recourse to matters of innocence, character, resilience or agency.”⁴³ The above narratives offer a good example. While many of the women in this case study are in an undeniably vulnerable situation, or as Cole would refer to it as “more-than-ordinary vulnerable” condition, whether due to their uprootedness, precarious legal status, gender or lack of stable financial resources, the latter, should not necessarily entail their victimhood. In fact, in this case study, the social restrictions and social structure that produced vulnerability due to gender and forced migration opened new spaces and opportunities to those refugee women and offered them a social advantage that is particularly available to this gendered and ethicized group, and its “reputation,” and is not available to other social groups within other refugee communities. Hence, vulnerability offers an analytical tool that is inclusive of stories such as *Maha*, *Nour*, *Marwa*, *Nazira*, *Shirin*, and *Mohra* without the need for reductionist categories and stigmatizing statuses.

CONCLUSION

This is an attempt to examine those women's stories from a critical perspective to reveal the complexity of their experiences and their subjectivities in terms of maneuvering social structure and exercising agency and relational autonomy. More importantly, it is an attempt to decolonize some of the categories and binaries that those women are prescribed to such as agency/victimhood, voluntary/involuntary marriage, and marriage for intimacy/marriage as an opportunity. A decolonizing lens also assist in offering a theoretical de-coupling of notions such as agency and resistance, empowerment and independence (especially economic), and vulnerability and victimhood.

Refugee women, especially those from the Global South, are often seen as victims, not just of displacement but of their patriarchal and "backward," "traditional" cultures and practices. The views expressed by my respondents describing a woman without a husband "like a tree without leaves," choosing marriage over career, or believing that marriage is the woman's natural path, violate core assumption in the liberal/Western feminist understanding of victimhood, agency and empowerment. From this perspective, such woman might be seen as: ". . . complicit in the socio-cultural practices that might be interpreted as oppressive to her. Her idea of "her place" in the home, society, and the world at large may offend the delicate sensibilities of feminists, who may view her choices as non-choices, giving her little credit for her agency in the world."⁴⁴ In this paper, I sought to demonstrate those women's complex subjectivities and decision-making processes that are based on their awareness of their social and cultural positions due to their gender and displacement in order to expand the meanings and implications of the above mentioned notions beyond their Eurocentric understanding that dominate feminist and humanitarian discourses.

My aim is not to deny instances of SGBV and exploitation in the Global South all together. Rather by applying a decolonizing "filter" to better characterize phenomena, such as marriage for refuge, more culturally relevant support can be offered to refugee women and women from the Global south at large. Understanding *Sotra* as means for protection from SGBV and recognizing the different challenges resulting from marriage immobility vis-à-vis forced marriage are but two examples. To reiterate, *Sotra* marriage, traditional gender roles such as wifhood and motherhood and marriage immobility are some

strategies that challenge the norms of liberal feminism, and that were utilized by my respondents to ensure their social protection, after they weighed their risks and benefits. Syrian women in my research used marriage to maneuver legal, social, and economic pressures of displacement, as well as to create their own versions of empowerment, self-reliance and resistance to social and sexual harassment.

NOTES

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² Omer Karasapan, "Who are the 5 Million Refugees and Immigrants in Egypt?" *Brookings*, 4 October 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/10/04/who-are-the-5-million-refugees-and-immigrants-in-egypt/>.

³ Khalid Hassan, "Why Some Syrian Refugees See Marriage as the Only Option," *Al-Monitor*, 8 December 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/12/egypt-syria-refugees-women-marriage-aid.html#ixzz4LTGBszPg>; R. Geha, "Syrian Refugees Struggle in Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, 21 November 2012, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/politics/2012/11/the-plight-of-syrian-refugees-in-egypt.html#>

⁴ From the campaign Facebook page: "Refugees not captive was founded in 2012 in response to the war crimes in Syria. Today Refugees. . . Not captive is active in Jordan, turkey, Lebanon And Egypt Our aims. We are working to give women in crisis areas the self-confidence, the strength and the opportunity to -take control of their lives- overcome threats to themselves and their families-perform active reconciliation work.' Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Lajiaat.Lasabayaa>.

⁵ Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou and Helene Moussa, eds., *Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

⁶ Angela Raven-Roberts, "Women and the Political Economy of War," in *Women and Wars: Contested Histories Uncertain*, ed. Carol Cohn (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012), 36-53.

⁷ Hajdukowski-Ahmed et al, *Not Born a Refugee Woman*, 9.

⁸ Sherene H. Razack, "Imperiled Muslim Women, Dangerous Muslim Men and Civilized Europeans: Legal and Social Responses to Forced Marriages," *Feminist Legal Studies* 12, no. 2 (2008): 129-74, 129.

⁹ Liberal feminism has been subjected to many critiques and revisions from other strands of feminism such as postcolonial feminism, transnational feminism, Marxist feminism, critical race feminism, and black feminism, the critique centered around the idea that liberal feminism emerged from the West to reflect the specific experience of white middle class cis-gender heterosexual women and in reflection to their historical contexts and social dynamics and as a consequence fails to understand the challenges and meanings of liberation, equality and empowerment in other non-Western cultures (see for instance Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal, "Transnational Feminist Cultural Studies: Beyond the Marxism/Poststructuralism/Feminism Divides," in *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, eds. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, and Mino Moallem (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 349-63; Ratna Kapur, *Erotic Justice: Law and the New Politics of Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," in *CCCS Selected Working Papers* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 753-74; and Patricia Hill Collins, "Gender, Black Feminism, and Black Political Economy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568, no. 1 (2000): 41-53.

¹⁰ Sylvia Bawa, "Paradoxes of (Dis)empowerment in the Postcolony: Women, Culture and Social capital in Ghana," *Third World Quarterly*, 37, no. 1 (2016): 119-35.

¹¹ It is important, however, before we proceed, to draw attention to some recent scholarship, especially in indigenous and ethnic studies, that prefer to use terms such as anti-colonialism or decolonization over postcolonialism. They justify their choice by arguing that 'terms like postcolonialism or even decolonization, facilitate the ability of academics to position colonialism as being something of the past, as in "colonialism is over and now we can decolonize" (Carlson, 2016, 6).

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 245.

¹³ Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Boundary 2*, 20, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 24-50.

¹⁴ Ilan Kapoor, *The Postcolonial Politics of Development* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 56.

¹⁵ Madina Vladimirovna Tiostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012), 12.

¹⁶ Lesley Hopkins, "Why Narrative? Reflections on the Politics and Processes of Using Narrative in Refugee Research," *Tamara Journal of Critical Organisation Inquiry* 8, no. 1/2 (2009): 135, 137.

¹⁷ Halleh Ghorashi, "Giving Silence a Chance: The Importance of Life Stories for Research on Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 1 (2007): 117–32, 120.

¹⁸ Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach* (London: Sage, 2013), 26.

¹⁹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 511.

²⁰ N.A. Youssef and A. Ismail "In Cairo, Desperate Egyptian Men Search in Vain for Syrian Brides," *McClatchyDC*, 14 May 2013, <https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/middle-east/article24749116.html>.

²¹ Very little has been written about how race and racism affect the host-refugee relationship especially in the MENA region. For instance, Jane Kani Edward ("Race, Racism, and Ethnicity in a Refugee Context," in *Sudanese Women Refugees* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 159–87) wrote about the different forms of oppressions and how they are "interlocked" to study "how race, ethnicity, and gender determine the outcome of the relationship between southern Sudanese refugees and the host population in Cairo." Similarly, Fábos (2008; 2012) wrote about Muslim Arab Sudanese women and how they negotiate their identity and racial labelling in the diaspora focusing on the Egyptian context. The issue of Shadeism (see for instance, Anne Nelun Obeyesekere "The Fairness of Shadows," *New Framings on Anti-Racism and Resistance: Volume 1–Anti-Racism and Transgressive Pedagogies* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1–22), anti-blackness and desire for whiteness and their colonial roots are under researched especially in the Egyptian and Arab contexts. It is particularly relevant to the Syrian refugee brides and was explicitly and implicitly mentioned by both husbands and Syrian wives as one of the factors determining both the initial physical attraction and the fetishism reinforcing the idea of the docility, domesticity, and beauty of Syrian wives. My respondents interviewed for this project showed indications of their awareness of these assumptions and taking advantage of them. Further analysis on how they utilized their "fairness" and ethnicity to make agential choices are the subject of the broader doctoral research focusing on this phenomenon.

²² See for instance, Hani M. Henry, "African Refugees in Egypt: Trauma, Loss, and Cultural Adjustment," *Death Studies* 36, no. 7 (2012): 583–604.

²³ Bawa, *Paradoxes of (Dis)empowerment in the Postcolony*, 119–35.

²⁴ Jennifer Hyndman, "The Securitization of Fear in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97, no. 2 (2007): 361–72.

- ²⁵ S.K. Kim, "'I am well-cooked food': Survival Strategies of North Korean Female Border-Crossers and Possibilities for Empowerment," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2014): 553–71.
- ²⁶ M.Y. Young and K.J. Chan, "The Psychological Experience of Refugees: A Gender and Cultural analysis," in *Psychology of Gender Through the Lens of Culture*, eds. S. Safda and N. Kosakowska-Berezecka (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 17–36.
- ²⁷ See Sepali Guruge, Parvathy Kanthasamy, Jalalah Jokarasa, Theresa Yi Wai Wan, Maryam Chinichian, Khosro Refaie Shirpak, Petroiya Paterson, and Shree-Sai Guruge Sathananthan, "Older Women Speak About Abuse & Neglect in the Post-Migration Context," *Women's Health and Urban Life* 9, no. 2 (2010): 15–41; Young and Chan, "The Psychological Experience of Refugees."
- ²⁸ Anita Ho and Carol Pavlish, "Indivisibility of Accountability and Empowerment in Tackling Gender-based Violence: Lessons from a Refugee Camp in Rwanda," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 88–109.
- ²⁹ Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 202–36.
- ³⁰ Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil, (2012). "'Is the Headscarf Oppressive or Emancipatory?' Field Notes from the Multicultural Debate," *Religion and Gender* 2, no. 1 (2012): 36–56, 54–5.
- ³¹ Gudrun Dahl, "Sociology and Beyond: Agency, Victimisation and the Ethics of Writing," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37, no. 3 (2009): 391–407.
- ³² Dahl, "Sociology and Beyond," 391, 396.
- ³³ See Raven-Roberts, "Women and the Political Economy of War"; and Mats Utas, "Victimcy, Girlfriending, Soldiering: Tactic Agency in a Young Woman's Social Navigation of the Liberian War Zone," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2005): 403–43.
- ³⁴ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90.
- ³⁵ Relational autonomy is the label that has been given to an alternative conception of what it means to be "a free, self-governing agent who is also socially constituted and who possibly defines her basic value commitments in terms of inter- personal relations and mutual dependencies" (Christman, 2004, 143). Recognizing relational autonomy as an analytical tool help us see those women as aware of their social position, aware of the social transaction or the mutual benefit created by this form of marriage.
- ³⁶ Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
- ³⁷ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent," 255.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse," in *Feminism/postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 327, x.

⁴¹ Dina Taha, "Women Refugees and Epistemic Privilege: Opening the Borders Between Postcolonial Feminism and Forced Migration Studies," *Refugee Review* 3 (2017).

⁴² Alyson Cole, "All of Us Are Vulnerable, But Some Are More Vulnerable than Others: The Political Ambiguity of Vulnerability Studies, an Ambivalent Critique," *Critical Horizons* 17, no. 2 (2016): 260–77.

⁴³ Cole, "All of Us Are Vulnerable," 271.

⁴⁴ Bawa, "Paradoxes of (Dis)empowerment in the Postcolony," 5.