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IN THE SKIES OVER SOFIA: PLACE(S) IN DISPLACEMENT FOR SYRIAN WOMEN IN BULGARIA

Abstract

This article shows that policy categories such as “refugees” and “migrants” fail to capture the complex reasons why people move during conflict and how they experience place(s) in displacement. Drawing on ethnographic interviews conducted in the summer of 2021, we explore the ways in which three Syrian women, whose lives have been affected by *displacement* in complex ways, *emplace* themselves in Sofia. Although policymakers consider Bulgaria a transit country for refugees on the so-called Western Balkan route, some Syrians have stayed after 2011. Their choice can only be understood in the context of longstanding trade and marital migrations encompassing the Mediterranean and its hinterlands, and we thus develop a mobile and dynamic understanding of Syrians’ acts of emplacement: they may be localized in Sofia, but they also unfold against the backdrop of transnational networks. However, we do not romanticize ideas of constant fluidity. Rather, we put *place* back into *displacement*, demonstrating that women’s lives and migratory projects are shaped by the places they pass through, and that they leave an imprint on transitory and more permanent homes, workplaces, and neighborhoods in Sofia, with all the tensions and contradictions that this entails.

خلاصة

يوضح هذا المقال أن فئات السياسات مثل “اللاجئين” و “المهاجرين” تفشل في تفسير الأسباب المعقدة التي تجعل الناس يتنقلون أثناء النزاعات وكيف يواجهون “المكان” في النزوح. بالاعتماد على المقابلات الإثنوغرافية التي أجريت في صيف عام 2021، نستكشف الطرق التي اتبعتها ثلاث نساء سوريات، تأثرت حياتهم بالنزوح بطرق معقدة، للاستقرار في مدينة صوفيا. على الرغم من أن صانعي السياسات يعتبرون بلغاريا بلد عبور للاجئين تقع على ما يسمى بطريق غرب البلقان، إلا أن بعض السوريين استقروا فيها بعد عام 2011. ولا يمكن فهم اختيارهم إلا في سياق تاريخ طويل للهجرة من أجل التجارة والزواج والتي تشمل البحر الأبيض المتوسط ومناطقه النائية. وبالتالي تطوّر من خلال هذه الدراسة

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مفهوم ديناميكي قابل للاستعمال في سياقات مختلفة عن أعمال الاستقرار التي يقوم بها السوريين: قد يكون ناتج عن دراستنا في صوفيا، لكنه يتواجد أيضًا على خلفية الشبكات عبر الوطنية. ومع ذلك، فإننا لا نجعل أفكار الانسيابية المستمرة رومانسية. بدلاً من ذلك، قمنا بإعادة المكان إلى النزوح، موضحين أن حياة النساء ومشاريع الهجرة تتشكل من خلال الأماكن التي يمرون بها، وأنهم يتركون بصمة على المنازل المؤقتة والأكثر ديمومة وأماكن العمل والأحياء في صوفيا، مع كل التوترات و التناقضات التي يستتبعها هذا.



INTRODUCTION



Image 1: View from Um Omar's flat towards Vitosha Mountain. Photograph: Ann-Christin Zuntz, 2021.

In September 2019, Nura² traveled from Latakia in western Syria to Sofia, Bulgaria. However, Nura was not fleeing the Syrian conflict: "I only came here because of marriage, there was no other reason. I wanted to get some rest after work, I was so exhausted. I'm forty-seven years old and still working. I wanted to get married and live comfortably." In the middle of a civil war, Nura thus arranged for

herself a marriage with an older Syrian who had worked in Sofia since the 1980s and whom she had never met in person. A marital migrant, she traveled along a branch of the so-called Western Balkan route, six years after tens of thousands of displaced Syrians had arrived in Bulgaria and briefly plunged the country's refugee reception facilities into chaos. (As Nura was able to apply for a spousal visa to join her husband, she traveled more comfortably, taking planes instead of walking, and using buses and taxis.) In 2021, as conflict was still raging in northern Syria, Nura was planning a trip in the reverse direction, to Turkey, another host country of Syrian refugees. Again, Nura's travels were not for the purposes of seeking asylum. Instead, she was planning to undergo in vitro fertilization (IVF) and fulfill her dream of having a son.

Nura's case defies standard assumptions about why people move during conflict and about the linear nature of such movements. In this article, we take as a starting point the displacement experiences of women and their families who were already mobile before the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. We explore the ways in which three female Syrians, whose lives have been affected by *displacement* in complex ways, *emplace* themselves in Sofia. Following the women from their homes to workplaces and the public sphere, our research contests an essentialized understanding of Syrian displacement and emplacement. The article's title, "In the Skies over Sofia," refers to many Syrians' living situation in decrepit tower blocks on the outskirts of Bulgaria's capital, an architectural legacy of the country's socialist past. But the title also evokes the fragile attachment that our protagonists have formed with the city. Albeit fragile, we suggest this attachment has a strong aesthetic dimension, (re)framing common sense understandings of how displaced women choose to engage with and become visible in the spaces where they resettle.

Syrians are a tiny minority in Bulgaria, whose overall share of migrants and refugees was less than 3 percent of its seven million inhabitants in 2020.³ Between the summer of 2013 and the spring of 2014, Bulgaria briefly enjoyed international attention when its 240 kilometer-long land border with Turkey became the preferred entry point into the European Union (EU) for Syrian and other asylum seekers.⁴ More recent estimates of the Syrian presence in Bulgaria vary: while the majority of Bulgaria's 1,000–2,000 more permanently settled *refugees* are assumed to be Syrian,⁵ other sources include the longstanding Syrian diaspora, assuming much higher numbers of 13,500 Syrian *migrants*.⁶ In the summer of 2021, when the fieldwork for

this article was conducted, Bulgaria's short-lived refugee "crisis" had long blown over and many newly arrived Syrians had left for western Europe. Our protagonists, however, have not been included in these statistics, as they never applied for asylum. The three women in this article were not simply passing through in search for asylum in western Europe, even though two of them arrived after the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Instead, they intentionally migrated to Bulgaria, a country the United Nations calls "one of the fastest shrinking nations."⁷ Although Bulgaria is often painted as a country of outmigration and transit migration, such migration narratives thus fail to capture the complexities of our protagonists' engagement with place.

To make sense of Syrian women's displacement and emplacement in times of war, we build on recent anthropological scholarship on the complex relationship between place, movement, and identity. Following Liisa Malkki's seminal work from 1995, Forced Migration Studies have called out a sedentarist understanding of belonging that pathologizes refugees' movements and informs humanitarian and policy solutions premised on ending mobility.⁸ Ethnographic research during the Syrian conflict shows that many displaced Syrians have led mobile lives before, during, and after becoming displaced, often as circular migrants.⁹ Beyond current humanitarian crises, the discipline of anthropology more broadly has adopted displacement as a key paradigm, producing studies on humans' fluid, migratory lives.¹⁰ Relatedly, anthropologists have come to think of place not as a bounded entity but rather as constituted by movement.¹¹ Tim Ingold, for example, argues that people live their lives not in individual places but as "wayfarers," navigating a "meshwork" of interconnected places and trails.¹² In this article, we show the ongoing relevance of Syrian trade and marital migrations between the Middle East and the Balkans for orienting movements after 2011. Building on Ingold's idea of the "meshwork," we also discuss the aesthetic dimensions of emplacement and the visual politics surrounding it. On the one hand, we highlight how Syrian women's acts of emplacement may be localized in Sofia while also involving multiple other places, including left-behind homes in Aleppo and Damascus, fertility clinics in Turkey, and imagined destinations in western Europe. On the other hand, we show how emplacement has a strong aesthetic component, whereby selective visual representations and appearances facilitate a sense of agency, home, and identity.

In this article, by zooming in on three sites—Syrian women's homes, workplaces, and the streets—we hope to put *place* back into

displacement.¹³ We suggest that a renewed engagement with place matters for two reasons: on the one hand, it advances our understanding of the nexus between place and movement by highlighting the instability of categories such as “refugee,” “home,” and “local”. On the other, studying how migrant women become (in)visible in public spaces helps us engage with a broader “aesthetics of emplacement.” Our research therefore seeks to capture at least two complex, and previously unexamined, dynamics. First, our protagonists are far from free-floating agents. Rather, they develop everyday attachments to specific locations, even if they do not consider them their forever homes, and they carry with them memories of earlier homes and sites of transit, while developing expectations about future places. Taking inspiration from Andrew Arsan’s historical study of early twentieth-century Lebanese merchants in West Africa, our ethnography captures how Syrian women in Sofia can be “at once here, there and elsewhere.”¹⁴ Instead of portraying them as eternally liminal figures, Arsan connects the dots between Lebanese migrants’ emotional and material attachments to their local surroundings in the French colonies, left-behind homes in Lebanon, and new Lebanese diasporas in New York, Rio de Janeiro, and Manchester. In a similar vein, we highlight the tensions between Syrian women’s emplacements in Sofia – the places that matter to them right now – and their multiple orientations towards old houses and lifestyles in Syria as well as dream homes further afield. A portrait of our protagonists’ lives in Sofia would be incomplete without a description of the decoration on the walls of their living rooms alongside the phone calls and sometimes in-person visits that connect them to relatives and friends in Syria, Lebanon, Belgium, Germany, and so on. We also show that Syrian traditions and practices are not simply transferred from one geographic context to another but rather creatively adapted, and sometimes discarded – as, for example, in the case of Nura, whose wish for a son now includes plans for IVF.

By showcasing the tension between women’s ongoing forms of mobility and their acts of emplacement, we challenge ideas of both sedentary lives and of constant fluidity. There is a risk of approaching people on the move as displaced victims forever struggling to find their bearings in new environments. But this does not reflect the experience of all mobile people, especially not of those with preexisting ties to their new locations. As Um Omar’s case will show, some of our protagonists are very much at ease in their new “homes,” and rather than be seen as acts of displacement, their interactions with the city should be

understood through the prism of new and creative forms of emplacement. Conversely, while being mobile has helped some Syrian women establish new homes, aspirations for future mobility can also hamper one's ability to make oneself *at home*. The goal of this article is thus to capture our protagonists' complex experiences of place(s) in displacement. Naturally, homemaking in exile is far from straightforward. Feminist scholars remind us that one should not romanticize "being at home" as normal or natural; homes can be experienced as complicated and violent, especially by those at the bottom of family hierarchies.¹⁵ Instead of reifying distinctions between migrants, refugees, and locals, movement and static homes, it is more productive to explore the power relations that underpin emplacement and displacement, and that shape people's ability to make a home for themselves.¹⁶ As Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos put it, "Making home represents the process through which people gain control over their lives."¹⁷

Second, Syrian women's multiple, and at times contradictory, acts of emplacement are linked to visual practices, or what we call the "aesthetics of emplacement." Building on Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of the politics of aesthetics,¹⁸ we interrogate how the visual realm frames questions of integration and home: how identity, belonging, and emplacement are seen and can therefore be felt and thought of. Starting from the premise that our knowledge of the world is based on what is made visible and what remains hidden, a critical engagement with the politics of aesthetics questions our collective socialization in particular ways of looking, seeing, evaluating, and thinking. It explores how the visual realm delineates what is "sensible," and by extension, what is thinkable, meaningful, valuable, and acceptable. In other words, the politics of aesthetics interrogates how the visual realm constitutes collective notions of "common sense" and what are the "conditions of possibilities" for potential transformation of values, affect, and thoughts by making visible and sayable alternative realities.¹⁹ Importantly, by emphasizing the work of *aesthetics*, we do not engage in the study of beauty but rather explore how visibility sculpts collective values, perceptions, and understandings. The "aesthetics of emplacement" is instead a reference to how our protagonists choose to make themselves visible to others, and how they make the places they inhabit recognizable and meaningful in their daily lives.

At the same time, we remain cognizant of the context and broader forces at play that shape our protagonists' acts of

emplacements. Such forces range from the on-going conflicts in Syria; to transitions towards capitalist economy in southeastern Europe and the Middle East; and from increasingly restrictive European migration policies, to the growing reach of global tech companies creating a new economic niche for migrant and refugee workers in Sofia; and, last but not least, patriarchal structures that permeate Bulgarian immigration law and the Syrian diaspora in Sofia. By paying close attention to what emplacements “look like,” we capture how this conundrum of intimate and global dynamics affects women’s everyday lives and hopes for the future. Our protagonists are not only physically present but also develop important aesthetic connections to the places they interact with. They do so by making active political choices about how they are seen and recognized, as well as about the surroundings in which they interact with others. For example, in Sofia, Syrians have recreated familiar places, including traditional Syrian living rooms and shops. As the final section on “streets” discusses, recognizably Syrian places embedded in public spaces have also become a symbol of Sofia’s new cosmopolitan character, adding to the city’s lure of tourist attractions.

In the following section, we first argue that existing migration policy categories, especially “refugee” and “migrant”, fall short of capturing our protagonists’ presence in Sofia. Whilst these Syrian women exist mostly under the radar of the Bulgarian state, their movements and livelihoods continue to be shaped by patriarchal structures and values incompatible with the ways nation-states frame and enact migration protocols. We draw on historical and ethnographic studies, including research on Syrian migrations to the Americas in the early twentieth century and more recent forms of grassroots globalization in the Mediterranean, to shed light on women’s projects of movement, marriage, and work. Afterwards, in the remaining thematic sections, we turn to three locations through which we study Syrian women’s displacement and emplacement: apartments, workplaces, and streets. In examining the visual construction of such spaces, we formulate the “aesthetics of emplacement” to emphasize our protagonists’ choices of how they can be seen, recognized, and identified. We round out the discussion by turning to the case of a Bulgarian NGO engaged in “creative place-making.” Here, we show how the “aesthetics of emplacement” allow us make sense of our protagonists’ peculiar absences and presences in the context of Bulgarian migration policies, bottom-up globalization, and the patriarchy. We conclude by discussing the wider implications of this research for the study of a “global” Middle East.

The three interviews this article draws on were conducted by Ann-Christin Zuntz as part of a pilot study, financed by a seed grant from Universitas 21, on female refugee labor in Bulgaria's budding gig economy. Our research was facilitated by Humans in the Loop, a social enterprise in Sofia that trains refugee and migrant women in image annotation and ethical artificial intelligence. Zuntz met Malika and Um Omar through Humans in the Loop; Malika is a long-term employee while Um Omar took part in one of the organization's training courses but did not enjoy the work and thus did not continue. In return, Um Omar introduced Zuntz to her friend Nura, the sole employee of a female-only hair salon in the city center of Sofia that has become a hub for Syrian women, including visiting relatives from abroad. Malika chose to be interviewed in a street café on Vitosha Boulevard, Sofia's main shopping street, while Um Omar preferred to meet at home. Zuntz spoke with Nura in her salon when there were no other customers present, while also receiving a hair treatment. Asking the women to pick the interview location put them at ease and, in the cases of Um Omar and Nura, created intimate spaces for extended one-to-one interactions. The women's choice of interview location and prominent surroundings further allowed for conceptualizing the role of aesthetics in our protagonists' lives. Zuntz also walked and took public transport with Um Omar and Malika to get a better sense of how the women navigate the city. Several days before the interview, all women received consent forms and participant information sheets in Arabic about the study, and we discussed consent to take part in the research again on the day of the meeting. All women knew that they would be asked questions about their mobility history and working experience in Sofia. During the interviews, Zuntz also sought permission to take pictures of the women's surroundings. Following Annika Lems,²⁰ we find that narrative interviews do more than simply collect ready-made life stories. The act of storytelling itself becomes a way of reliving and reshaping one's experiences. While all interviews were conducted in Arabic, it is of relevance that the Syrian protagonists told their stories to a western European foreigner, at a particular moment. Namely, Zuntz met the three protagonists at a time when the humanitarian system in Sofia had exposed them to new ideas about resettlement to more affluent parts of Europe, and while at least two of them were exploring new opportunities for relocating themselves and their families. Thus, the interviews became moments of reflection, allowing women to take stock of their previous migration, marital plans, and hopes for the future.

WOMEN'S LIVES OUTSIDE POLICY CATEGORIES

This article relies on ethnographic interviews with Nura, Malika, and Um Omar. What all three women have in common are complex mobility histories that do not look anything like linear representations of displacement, defying existing policy categories for people on the move. In this section, we begin with an overview of Bulgaria's migration policies and to what extent their distinctions matter to our Syrian protagonists. We then delve into the backstory of Syrian-Bulgarian connections and Syrian transnational mobilities more broadly, showing how a historically informed perspective confounds simplistic distinctions between different types of movers.

Since 1989, Bulgaria's asylum and migration policies have evolved as part of the country's convergence with the EU, which it officially joined in 2007.²¹ Both its international commitments and domestic legislation oblige Bulgaria to offer protection to displaced people. In 1993, Bulgaria joined the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.²² As a member of the EU, Bulgaria also adheres to the Dublin Regulation that stipulates that displaced people should apply for asylum in their first European country of arrival. Domestically, the right to seek asylum is guaranteed by the 1991 Bulgarian constitution and the 2002 Asylum and Refugees Act.²³ The latter provides registered asylum seekers with accommodation and access to public services in open reception centers, while granting those with approved refugee status free access to the Bulgarian labor market.²⁴

Since 2014, Europe's "refugee crisis" has triggered new policies while raising awareness of Bulgaria's role as an external EU border and bulwark against asylum seekers now framed as security threats.²⁵ Compared to only 6,000 arrivals in Bulgaria in 2014, the numbers of displaced people peaked at 31,000 in 2015 and 17,000 in 2016; in the five years after 2013, more than 60,000 people applied for asylum.²⁶ However, the Bulgarian state lacks the political will to extend a warm welcome. With only 11 percent, Bulgaria's recognition rate for refugees is one of the lowest in the EU, and since 2017, Bulgaria's State Agency for Refugees has tried to get rid of refugees already on the books, illegally terminating granted refugee status for those who have left Bulgaria after a successful asylum application and have not renewed their identity documents. In 2018 and 2019, more than 4,000 registered refugees, half of whom were Syrians, thus lost protection.²⁷

In the eyes of the Bulgarian state, however, the women in this article are not considered "refugees," but rather "migrants": they did not enter the country during the mass influx of refugees in 2013–14 and

never applied for asylum, instead gaining residency through alternative legal pathways. Like its refugees, Bulgaria's 150,000 immigrants are not numerically significant, and there are few efforts to retain them.²⁸ Migrants' rights to entry, residence, and work are defined in the 1998 Foreigners Act, in the Labor Migration and Labor Mobility Act (last amended in 2018), and in four national migration strategies since 2007. However, policies frequently change, favoring a narrow demographic, including highly skilled workers, foreign citizens of Bulgarian origin, and labor migrants arriving through bilateral agreements with neighboring countries.²⁹ Even though our protagonists are not a priority to the Bulgarian state, they have been treated more generously than many other migrants, becoming eligible for permanent residency permits and receiving unlimited access to the labor market by virtue of being the wives and daughters of men who had lived in Bulgaria for at least five years.³⁰ Unlike labor migrants, these women were not treated as potential assets, or burdens, to the Bulgarian economy, but only became visible to the Bulgarian state as the charges of migrant men. Um Omar, the oldest and in her fifties, is originally from rural Aleppo but grew up in Beirut with her Lebanese mother. At the age of eighteen, she married a cousin in Syria and lived there for three years, before joining her husband in Bulgaria in 1990. Malika, now in her early thirties, grew up between Damascus, Amman, and later Sofia, where her father has lived since 1991. First visiting Sofia during the summer holidays, she, her mother, and brother joined her father in Bulgaria more permanently in the mid-2000s. After five years, she returned to Syria to study architecture in Aleppo but had to leave again in 2012 when fighting intensified. In September 2019, newlywed Nura entered Bulgaria with a visa to join her Syrian husband. In Bulgaria as elsewhere in the world, patriarchal structures continue to inform immigration and asylum policies that prioritize men as mobile subjects while treating women as passive dependents.³¹ In the case of Syrian women in Sofia, a heteronormative understanding of the ideal family facilitated their travels to and residency in Bulgaria. In later sections, we look at how similar power structures shape our protagonists' marriages and standings in the Syrian diaspora in Sofia. But we will also see that women like Nura strategically use existing policy categories to further their own migration projects – for example, to rid themselves of unwanted husbands sometime *after* arrival.

In practice, policy distinctions between “refugees” and “migrants” have little bearing on our protagonists' everyday lives. In Bulgaria, both types of mobile populations face the same challenges,

including a hostile public discourse, a quickly changing and confusing policy environment, and a lack of institutional support and capacity. In other words, once they obtain residency, both refugees and migrants are left to their own devices, struggling to secure housing and work.³² Still, even though our protagonists are not “refugees” in the legal sense, their lives have been touched by the recent conflict and mass displacement in Syria, and they sometimes access services for “refugees” from NGOs in Sofia. The Syrian war has created new responsibilities, challenges, as well as opportunities for them. For instance, Nura decided to get married and leave her home country because after a lifetime of hard work, she felt threatened by conflict-related economic insecurity. In Sofia, the temporary presence of refugees has led to the flourishing of the NGO landscape and the arrival of international funding. While most newly arrived refugees have now moved on, the women in this article have established social contacts with “old” and “new” Middle Eastern arrivals, while benefiting from NGO-led language and vocational training that are open to foreign women regardless of their immigration status.

Um Omar, a Syrian housewife, began using her Bulgarian skills to help newly arrived Syrian women access NGO assistance and medical care in Sofia, and is also making plans to bring her niece from an informal refugee camp in Lebanon. All women send remittances to family members in need and have been unable to visit loved ones for many years. In addition, their legal situation is made more complicated by the conflict. Malika, for example, was offered Bulgarian citizenship but cannot accept it, as this would require her to relinquish her Syrian nationality—but the necessary paperwork can only be completed inside Syria.

That Syrian *migrant* women in Sofia partake in certain aspects of the *refugee* experience and also access some refugee services shows the difficulty of applying policy labels to people’s complex forms of migration and displacement.³³ In truth, legal categories become relevant to their lives only when it comes to onward movement: Bulgaria is not currently a member of the Schengen Area, which comprises most of western Europe. Recognized refugees can travel to other EU countries for a maximum of three months, even though this does not automatically imply the right to work in other EU countries.³⁴ After 2011, most Syrians who first applied for asylum in Bulgaria moved on to western Europe and re-registered there; only a couple of hundred refugees settled in Bulgaria each year.³⁵ But the women in this article fall into the category of non-EU migrants in Bulgaria, whose

residency permits do not allow them to enter the Schengen Area without a visa.³⁶ As this article shows, such restrictions may limit their ambitions for onward travel.

The main problem with existing policy categories is an underlying assumption that migration and displacement are linear processes, at the endpoint of which movers will establish, or at least aspire to establish, permanent homes. Here, we take a cue from historical and ethnographic studies of the Middle East that shift the focus from unidirectional to circular mobilities, showing how women's movements in times of war are embedded into more longstanding and mundane histories and geographies of circulation.³⁷ Seen against the backdrop of the Middle East as a region with intense transnational ties, Syrian women's presence in Sofia is more than a migration oddity. In truth, it is a legacy of more longstanding circular migrations between the Balkans and the Middle East, which together contribute to the grassroots globalization of this part of the world.³⁸ Since the 1980s, the Mediterranean has become a zone of intense informal trade for electronic devices and textiles, with small-scale merchants from the Middle East and North Africa engaging in "suitcase" trade, importing small quantities of goods that they can sell to customers at home.³⁹ Like other cities on the fringes of Europe, Sofia is an important node in these networks. In the 1970s and 1980s, socialist countries became an important destination for Syrian exports. To pay off its considerable debt to the Soviet Union (USSR), Syria agreed in 1973 to send Syrian goods instead. The USSR and other socialist countries bought Syrian textiles, food, and accessories, and the amount of their purchases was offset against the Syrian debt. Back home, the Syrian Central Bank paid local producers in Syrian currency.⁴⁰ But the trade connections between Syria and the Eastern Bloc were not only monetary but also personal. Since the 1970s, socialist exchanges brought Syrian university students to Sofia. Many of these students came from old Damascene merchant families, who used their offspring's temporary stay in the Balkans to sell Syrian jewelry and textile to Bulgaria, via Istanbul.⁴¹ After 1991, hundreds of these Syrian migrants obtained Bulgarian citizenship or long-term residency permits. Alongside their trade from Syria, they also began importing electronic goods from Dubai. Between 1991 and 1997, more than 1,100 Syrian shops and enterprises opened in various Bulgarian cities. In the 1990s and 2000s, Syrian traders played a central role in facilitating the circulations of goods, people, and money.⁴² From Sofia, they placed orders with Afghan smugglers traveling via Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Syria, and Turkey. Old Soviet-era trade routes

were imprinted with more recent links between China and Syria.⁴³ The 34,000 Arabs present regularly or irregularly in Sofia in 2008 were not a disadvantaged ethnic minority in a post-socialist city in the throes of gentrification and rising inequalities but rather a wealthy, and well-connected, merchant class.⁴⁴ Krasteva similarly describes a diverse Arab migrant community living in Sofia in the mid-2000s, with their own Arabic-language schools, cultural organizations, and even bilingual monthly publications.⁴⁵ Even before the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Syrians were the biggest Arab group in the country.⁴⁶ With the latest wave of arrivals since 2011, the overlap of several generations of Syrians attests to the ever-changing nature of the Syrian diaspora in Sofia.

Unlike female suitcase traders from Tunisia and Algeria,⁴⁷ who travel on their own across the Mediterranean, the Syrian protagonists of this article have not been directly involved in transnational business. Rather, these women are the wives and daughters of Syrian traders, and their movements are entangled with and shaped by those of the men in their lives: fathers and husbands who all came to Bulgaria shortly before or after the fall of the socialist system and made a living working in import-export and travel agencies. However, it would be wrong to treat them as mere appendices of their husbands' migrations. On the contrary, we approach Syrian women as active actors who pursue marriage and job opportunities abroad. Our protagonists' lives are structured around marriage, and marriage becomes an important aspect of migration and achieving a middle-class lifestyle. In this regard, Syrian women in Sofia have much in common with Syrian refugee women elsewhere. In Jordan, for example, Syrians marry men from their own community with the hope that they might one day return together to their villages of origin.⁴⁸ In contrast, Syrians in Egypt decide to marry local men once they give up on return to their home country, with marriage becoming a settlement strategy.⁴⁹ For Syrian women, marriage as a migratory project is far from new: between the 1870s and 1920s, thousands of female Syrians and Lebanese (then citizens of the Ottoman Empire) moved to the Americas to reunite with their fiancés, and also as single women and widows.⁵⁰ Although intellectual voices from the newly emerging transnational Syrian and Lebanese middle class frowned upon female employment, envisioning educated migrants as the "goddesses of their families and homes,"⁵¹ these women's real-life existence was often different: many had acquired work experience in agriculture and silk factories in the Middle East, and upon arrival to the Americas took up work as peddlers, shop

owners, and factory girls.⁵² And these earlier migrant women showed similar agency when it came to marriage: choosing and discarding husbands, providing for their children, and sending remittances to relatives in the Middle East. In a similar vein, we show that our female protagonists may migrate to get married, have households of their own, and lead comfortable lives while juggling the contradictions of unemployed husbands, disappointing sons, and exploitative jobs. The life stories of Syrian traders' wives and daughters in Sofia are more than a mere footnote in an economic history of globalization. Instead, the following ethnographic insights contribute to a richer, and more nuanced, affective and mundane history of Syrian migrant life.

MAKING HOMES THROUGH MARRIAGE



Image 2: Middle Eastern decoration in Um Omar's apartment. Photograph: Ann-Christin Zuntz, 2021.

"When you get through the door, you think you're in Syria!" This is how Malika describes her parents' house in Sofia, but similar things might be said about Um Omar's flat. Um Omar's living room is furnished with plush sofas, heavy curtains, and Middle Eastern decoration, including brass teapots and vases, and antique rifles on the wall (Image 2). "My husband likes ancient things like this, I don't know where he got these from," she shrugged. Upon arrival, Zuntz was immediately led into the room serving as a *madafa*, a traditional room

set apart for receiving visitors from outside the family. Ever the accomplished Syrian hostess, Um Omar brought tea, coffee, several types of cake and fruit, and only then sat down to answer questions. Yet when guests step out onto Um Omar's balcony, they are rewarded with a magnificent view over a distinctly Bulgarian landscape: run-down apartment towers, treetops, and in the distance the forested Vitosha Mountain (Image 1). Um Omar's flat is located on one of the top floors of a derelict socialist building on the outskirts of Sofia. Her living room encapsulates the tensions between movement and home, traditions, and improvisation, and reveals the active choices which accompany an "aesthetics of emplacement." Even for Syrian families who have lived in Sofia for decades, "home" is not a place where one "practices" one's integration into Bulgarian mainstream society but rather a place for preserving Syrian culture and traditions and performing them in front of visitors through a carefully curated spectacle of visual and material display. At the same time, Um Omar's living situation and surroundings are typically Bulgarian: the dilapidation of high-rise buildings, like hers, bear the marks of the uneasy transformation from centralized to neoliberal market economy in the country, as well as the buildings' inhabitants' growing socioeconomic marginalization. Um Omar's husband, once a successful entrepreneur, used to import goods from Germany and the Netherlands and was able to buy their flat. But he has been unemployed for years and the family of three now relies on the sole income of Um Omar's twenty-six-year-old son who earns 70 Leva (around USD 44) a day in a kebab shop close to Zhenski Pazar, the Middle Eastern neighborhood in the center of Sofia.

Physical homes are not just sites of nostalgia and remembrance but are also loaded with expectations and dreams for the future, including for future families. Around the time of the interview, Um Omar was readying the apartment for the arrival of a new family member: her son's eighteen-year-old fiancée, his first cousin, who grew up in Syria and now lives as a refugee in Lebanon. To Um Omar, the family home has become an emotional anchor to facilitate some mobility plans (her niece's) and prevent others (her son's). Um Omar, who herself married a cousin, is arranging the match between her son and her niece to redress his upbringing as "more Bulgarian than Arab." Having visited Syria only twice as a child, her son Omar only speaks some words of Arabic. After making "the wrong friends," he dropped out of university. Um Omar's greatest fear is that Omar might get married to a Bulgarian woman who could deprive her of

grandchildren. Therefore, she decided to continue the tradition of bringing Syrian brides to Bulgaria, relying on a young woman from her own trusted social networks. The wedding papers would be signed by proxies, and then the niece would apply for a visa to join her husband in Sofia. Um Omar conceives of this new arrival as an extension of her own family, enlarging her household both socially (family tree) and materially (physical location). The newlyweds would live in Omar's old childhood room—a typical teenager's room with a guitar on the wall that Um Omar proudly shows to visitors—while she would train the bride in all matters of housekeeping. She anticipates that turning her son into a family man, and soon-to-be father, would motivate him to resume his university studies. Um Omar has thus found a unique way of dealing with the failure of patriarchal structures, such as her husband's unemployment and her son's gallivanting: she responds to this "crisis of the patriarchy" by *reinforcing* patriarchal structures, namely through the importation of a young bride. As an older woman, this does not weaken but rather elevates her own status in the family.⁵³ To Um Omar, the Syrian bride is a symbol of hope, of past and future combined. The young girl's presence in the family's life may bring her son back to a pious Syrian lifestyle and thus secure the family's economic survival, and also rebuild a traditional multigenerational Syrian family with Um Omar, the matriarch, at the center.

What makes Um Omar's flat a "home" somewhere between Syria and Sofia is her ability to take personal decisions and make plans for the future despite economic hardship. Her acts of emplacement are made possible by home ownership, choosing her preferred furniture, and even knowledge of public transport. When she picked up Zuntz for the interview, she cheekily dodged the tram fare. Like many Bulgarian residents of Sofia, she takes great pleasure in mundane acts of "cheating the system." Clearly, Um Omar feels comfortable associating with the city and its pathways. By contrast, Nura's experience illustrates the sense of loss and displacement when one lacks the ability to "emplace oneself." In 2019, middle-aged Nura decided to get married, "but not in Syria. You know, it's always the same [conservative] society." After more than twenty years of working as a hairdresser, including in her own salon, Nura was looking for a husband abroad who would appreciate an educated, independent-minded wife but also provide for her materially. At the same time, she was longing for a child but could not envision a future for her imagined son in war-torn Syria. Through her sister-in-law, she met her husband's sister and learned that the woman's brother was looking for a wife.

Nura and her future spouse began talking on the phone and his relatives later visited her family home to ask for her hand. As in the case of Um Omar's niece, wedding papers were signed in the absence of the groom, although Nura still had a wedding reception. Two years later, now working in a salon in Sofia, she proudly showed pictures on her phone of herself with voluminous hair, heavy makeup, and in a white gown. Two days after the wedding, she relocated to Bulgaria.

In Sofia, Nura soon learned that the comfortable home that she had pictured in her head did not exist. Instead, she moved in with her husband and his twenty-seven-year-old son from a previous marriage with a Bulgarian woman. They live in a cheap rental flat on the seventh floor, not unlike the high-rise building that Um Omar inhabits. But unlike Um Omar, Nura's place "does not feel like home" because she was unable to bring any personal belongings. This seemingly casual remark is once again suggestive of the extent to which the visual/material realm becomes an important referent of emplacement, providing a sense of orientation and belonging. Granted, in Nura's case there are also interpersonal dynamics getting in the way of "feeling at home": she gets on well with her stepson but often finds herself caught in conflicts between father and son. "I told my husband not to discipline him in front of me, if you want to tell him off, take him outside for a walk." In her new life, Nura was planning to retire and raise a child; she was also expecting welfare support from the Bulgarian state. Instead, she now finds herself in a situation where she has to contribute to the rent payment:

Here, everything is about money. In Syria, the husband would provide for the wife. But he [her husband] lives the European way. I told him, I'm not your girlfriend, I am your wife. He only provides for food, it's not like in Syria where I could go to the mall and buy whatever I want.

Even Bulgarian food makes her sick and Nura fears that her mental health has been degrading. The only thing she likes about her new flat are the high trees that surround it. Still, she would rather buy an old house in ruins—of which there are many available in the villages around Sofia—if only she could restore it herself and make it her own. Her move to Bulgaria was meant to enhance Nura's freedom, but instead she describes her new marital home as a prison and an unsafe place. Nura now deplores girls who get married young: "At the age of

twenty, she will have to stay with her husband for thirty years, so many things can happen to her. . . . At least you only give up the end of your life when you get married in your thirties.” Her example captures the ambivalence of emplacement: having made a new home and family for herself outside Syria has not ended Nura’s economic insecurity but rather exacerbated it. What Randa Tawil wrote about another Syrian woman in Detroit one hundred years earlier seems to capture Nura’s fate: “The more [she] traveled, the more she seemed to be trapped.”⁵⁴

MAKING HOMES THROUGH WORK



Image 3: Inside Nura’s salon. Photograph: Ann-Christin Zuntz, 2021.

The church bells from the imposing Saint Joseph Cathedral, on the opposite side of the road, interrupt the conversation with Nura. Once again, the experienced hairdresser works in a salon. The store has opaque windows, and the entrance door is often locked when female customers or other visitors are inside (see Image 3). Nura’s salon consists of one small room, with a number of sinks, mirrors, and shelves filled with cosmetic products (Image 3). For a Bulgarian passerby, it would be impossible to know that this modest place in the city center of Sofia has turned into a hub for Syrian women from all walks of life, including long-term marital migrants, newly arrived asylum seekers, and those with refugee status elsewhere visiting family

in Bulgaria. In the summer of 2021, Zuntz witnessed a chance encounter between Um Omar, Nura, and a Syrian customer at the salon. As we arrived, Nura was styling the beautiful long hair of a visiting Syrian woman who lived as a refugee in Denmark. In between treatments, Nura snuck out to buy coffee in paper cups and on her return firmly closed the door behind her. With a sigh, Um Omar made herself comfortable on a sofa and took off her headscarf. Over coffee and cigarettes, the three women compared their fates. What was life like for Syrians in Denmark and Bulgaria?

In this section, we look at another place that provides a spatial anchor for Syrian women in Sofia: the workplace. Refugee integration is often framed in socioeconomic terms and refugees' "success" tends to be measured by their access to formal labor markets and entrepreneurship.⁵⁵ The ethnographic data below, however, tell a murkier story: workspaces can be an opportunity for Syrian women to enlarge their social circles, improve their Bulgarian language skills, and acquire personal income. To women like Nura, the workplace also becomes a second, and preferred, "home away from home" – that is, away from unwanted spouses. But work can also trap women in diaspora networks, patriarchal structures, and informal labor. Contrary to an upbeat humanitarian discourse about women dreaming of joining the workforce, getting a job can also be a symptom of poverty, signaling the failure of traditional providers, such as fathers and husbands, to deliver both in terms of customary practices and actual family needs. As the following shows, only Malika understands work as a form of self-fulfillment, while Um Omar and Nura work not as a sign of their emancipation but as a burdensome obligation driven by their families' economic essentials. We already learned that for Um Omar, self-fulfillment is found in the generational transition to becoming a matriarch and grandmother, a conventional Syrian understanding of social status and norms that she upholds after three decades of living in Bulgaria. In a similar vein, for Nura, a fulfilled life would mean *not* working, so she can concentrate on her roles as the head of a prosperous household and as a mother. Hence, the following insights bring to light that women's new experiences in the workplace may not lead to a romanticized disruption but rather to a further reinforcement of older patriarchal structures.

In Nura's first year and a half in Bulgaria, she did not speak a word of the language and did not know any locals. She often accompanied her husband to work, including to other cities like Plovdiv and Burgas. As the couple's economic situation worsened, a

Syrian acquaintance, an older dentist from Damascus and a respectable member of the Syrian diaspora in Sofia, weighed in on her fate. He told her husband that it was wrong that his wife should stay at home. Instead, the dentist suggested a business arrangement: he would open a salon, buy the equipment, and Nura could run it for him. Nura describes this deal as a stroke of good fortune: "Good things come to good people." But over time, the arrangement has turned out to be exploitative. Every month, she pays 500 Leva (USD 304) in rent. Her basic monthly income is only 200 Leva (USD 121), even though she works every day. Whenever she generates a surplus, she is required to give half of it to the salon owner. "I asked him, do you [also] want half of my exhaustion?" The company is registered in the dentist's name, and she has never seen her employment contract. In truth, the Syrian diaspora networks that have facilitated her transnational marriage also shape the conditions of her employment in Sofia. Decisions about the end of her retirement and the nature of her work are taken by influential male elders of the Syrian community in Sofia whom even Nura's husband cannot object to. The salon does not situate Nura in Bulgaria but rather in a transnational Syrian community and its gendered and generational power structures. "I feel exploited 100 percent," she says. "We're in a European country, I didn't expect this to happen. . . . This is not Europe yet, this is still an Arab society." Just like in Um Omar's case, the "crisis of the patriarchy" evident in the underemployment of Nura's husband and stepson has led not to a contestation but to a reinforcement of her social world's wider patriarchal organization. At the same time, attempts by Nura's husband and her employer to control her income and limit her integration in Bulgaria only go so far. Through her work, Nura has come to know her Bulgarian neighbors and learned Bulgarian, and increasingly welcomes female Bulgarian clients. She has also made female friends in the Syrian community and, as our chance encounter with a Syrian woman from Denmark suggests, has become herself a small part of Sofia's "arrival infrastructure" of non-state institutions where new migrants access information and establish social contacts with the help of other, more established migrants.⁵⁶ As Nura puts it, "In the desert, you have to make things beautiful" – in the inhospitable landscape of Sofia, she likens her salon to an oasis for wayfarers like herself. Being able to make aesthetic choices on the type of preferred visual surroundings gives her an orientation in an otherwise perpetually foreign place.⁵⁷ And she does not stop there. Importantly, she has started to make plans of her own for her income: her dream is to undergo IVF in Turkey, with an egg donation that would comply

with Islamic laws. (To this purpose, her husband would have to conclude an Islamic marital contract with the egg donor for the duration of the treatment.) Nura has done extensive research online, including about renowned clinics and experts in Turkey, costs, and visa arrangements. To pay for the USD 3,000 procedure, Nura would like to bring in a Bulgarian business partner and make the salon more profitable.

Syrian women's experiences of the workspace in Sofia are shaped by their age, educational level, and expectations about gender segregation. Younger and more highly skilled women may view their insertion into the labor market differently than older women with menial or no professions such as Um Omar and Nura. Malika, in her early thirties, was unable to finish her architecture degree in Aleppo. After she joined her father in Sofia in 2012, she enrolled in an industrial engineering course and obtained a diploma. Unlike many of her female Syrian peers who refuse to work in mixed-gender environments, Malika was looking for a job to support her parents, "but there is not a lot of work here for women wearing the headscarf." Having attended Arabic-language schools in Sofia, she was not fluent in Bulgarian. Like Nura, her first job was found through diaspora networks: she taught primary-school children in Arabic at the Lebanese school in Sofia, albeit without a contract and for little pay. Unlike Nura, Malika later succeeded in transitioning to more formal employment in Bulgaria's mainstream economy. Malika met the founder of Humans in the Loop while enrolled in a Bulgarian class with Caritas and became a member of the first cohort of women taking English and information technology (IT) classes, and later working with the social enterprise. Although Malika had studied at university, image annotation was a new field to her, and she learned to use new computer programs. Through Humans in the Loop, she met other displaced women from Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as employees from Germany and the United Kingdom. Subsequently, this cosmopolitan working experience helped her find a more permanent job with a Bulgarian IT company that provides support services to international tech giants. Spending her day processing payment vouchers for shopping websites, Malika is part of a team of fifty employees who use Bulgarian, Arabic, and Spanish as their working languages. Malika benefits from the growing importance of IT outsourcing to Bulgaria and the availability of jobs for highly skilled workers, including international students and graduates with foreign language skills like herself.⁵⁸ Being employed by a subcontractor for the likes of Amazon and eBay, Malika has thus

arrived at the heart of global capitalism. At the company, Malika earns 1,150 Leva (USD 698) per month. Her working hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day. During her lunch break and in the evening, Malika continues to do image annotation for Humans in the Loop; sometimes she stays up until three in the morning. One of her regular projects with Humans in the Loop brings in another 900–1000 Leva (USD 547–607) a month; she also occasionally takes on additional short-term tasks. Malika works two jobs at the same time so she can support her father, whose travel agency struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic. As in the case of the other two women, her labor thus ends up benefitting her entire family.

After the end of the recorded interview, Malika struck up a conversation about what it means to be a working Syrian woman. Having grown up partly in Sofia, Malika is familiar with Bulgarian gender norms, but she is also an astute observer of Syrian newcomers' experiences. Among the Syrian community in Sofia, she notices a lot of pressure on young women to get married, and many Syrian girls aspire to quickly become wives and mothers. Some fathers forbid their daughters from working, especially in mixed-gender environments. Malika encountered other Syrian women her age at the training with Humans in the Loop but cannot identify with them: "When I met them at Humans in the Loop, they didn't even know how to switch on a computer. These girls don't know anything." At the same time, many young women feel bored; unlike in Syria, their days are not filled with family visits. Malika's older sister got married two years ago and now lives with her Syrian husband and baby in Frankfurt. Syrian suitors have visited Malika's parents four times to ask for her hand, but for now Malika's father encourages her work, and she has made no plans to get married.

THE STREET: INVISIBLE WOMEN



Image 4: A water pipe shop in Zhenski Pazar, central Sofia. Photograph: Ann-Christin Zuntz, 2021.

Throughout the article, we showed how the visual and material realm facilitates our protagonists' capacity to become oriented and (re)create a sense of home or belonging in an otherwise foreign environment. Yet we would be remiss in our portrayal if we only focused on such private and semiprivate spaces. Therefore, in the last section, we turn to Sofia's streets, interrogating the politics of aesthetics and the political choices around visibility and representation in which our protagonists engage. As alluded to in previous sections, such a visual turn is critical not only in thinking about the choices people on the move make, but also in considering how visual representations of the "other" are entangled with the legal categories of "migrant" and "refugee."

In considering the public spaces and streets of Sofia, it is important to start from the long-standing tradition of a Middle Eastern *visual* presence going back decades, or even centuries, if various remnants of the Ottoman Empire are included. When Malika's father first arrived in 1991, there was already a small Arab community, particularly around Zhenski Pazar (Women's Market). The market itself is within walking distance of a famous sixteenth-century mosque, built while Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire. Over the past few decades, the traditional Zhenski Pazar area has become a male-

dominated migrant neighborhood, witnessing the opening of phone and spice shops held by Syrians, Iraqis, Tunisians, and other Arab entrepreneurs. In the summer of 2021, when Zuntz visited, a varied choice of hookahs, bird cages, and Arabic and Persian language advertisements in the window displays of small shops gave the place a Middle Eastern flair (see Image 4). More recently, the area has turned into an attraction for locals and tourists; for example, the Bulgarian NGO Meeting Point offers a guided Food and Spices Walking Tour. But in a world of male shop and restaurant owners, Syrians like Nura, Um Omar, and Malika are absent from the Zhenski Pazar area not only as “refugees” or “migrants” but also as “women.”

In 2019, as a counterpoint to the gendered representation of the market area, Meeting Point ran an arts project meant to make Middle Eastern women visible in this public space. With the support of Caritas and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the NGO created a colorful wall painting, entitled *Mural, Mural on the Wall, I'm at Home after All*. Based on stories by refugee women from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Palestine, the Bulgarian artist Tochka Spot drew scenes of domestic bliss, including a woman with a headscarf standing by a window and marveling at her potted plants (see Image 5). The image is meant to convey a sense of belonging and inclusion – a message also explicated on Meeting Point’s website. On the website, a promotional video with English subtitles showcases a group of young women with headscarves painting the wall alongside the Bulgarian artist.⁵⁹ Complete with the UNHCR logo, the video is meant to convey a humanitarian success story. The mural and the video are both an invocation and a promise: they encourage Bulgarian observers to offer a warm welcome, while bearing testimony to refugee women’s efforts to rebuild their lives and homes in exile. Through its pictorial language, the mural reminds Bulgarians and refugees that their cultures are traditionally anchored around hospitality. For example, the mural shows a butterfly hovering over a large water vessel. In the video, the Bulgarian artist explains that this refers to a tradition in Iraq to leave water outside for thirsty strangers.

But the aesthetics of representation and the accompanying discourse also betray some of the anxieties and racialized complexities permeating this space. As part of the online description, a young woman is quoted as saying (in Arabic): “We want to send a message to Bulgarians that we are peaceful people. We want to work in this country and integrate in the full sense of the word.” In large letters, the video proclaims that refugee women are “grateful for a safe

environment where they can begin new lives.” In a country in which actual refugee numbers are very low, but anti-immigrant sentiment is rampant,⁶⁰ Meeting Point understands their project as a subversive form of “creative place-making,”⁶¹ an arts- and community-based approach to urban planning that has become popular among the creative industries in recent years.⁶² This type of activism draws attention to the “transformative power” of refugees’ and migrants’ emplacement:⁶³ the displaced do not simply insert themselves into existing spaces but rather produce new forms of spatiality, such as multiethnic neighborhoods in Sofia.

Still, the choice of singling out what appears to be a refugee woman as the token messenger for a multifaceted and largely male-dominated public space made us look further into the project. Drawing on Rancière’s insights into the politics of aesthetics, we therefore wanted to explore the “aesthetics of emplacement” by interrogating how the mural contributed to the creation of “common sense” understandings of migration and the “transformative power” of refugees. We also wanted to understand how this particular choice of visual representation compares to and contrasts with the aforementioned types of aesthetic choices our protagonists have made in order to achieve a sense of emplacement. The following section elaborates.

The origin story of the mural is itself suggestive of a reality of refugee and migrant presence in the city that is far more complex and multifaceted. The founders of Meeting Point used to work with Caritas and through their activities met many people from the Middle East. Whereas Caritas focuses on service provision, including financial assistance and educational training, Meeting Point was established to realize a more bottom-up approach to integration. As one of their representatives explains during our interview: “What we wanted to do is more activities that really make people feel at home and welcome.” The mural, together with the Food and Spices Walking Tour, was their first project, and participants were recruited through the founders’ existing networks with Caritas. For Meeting Point, their intimate knowledge of the refugee and migrant community was crucial. One of the founders contrasts their activities with those of other NGOs in Bulgaria that receive international funding and design projects but do not know their beneficiaries. In Meeting Point’s experience, this “community” is extremely diverse: many people with Middle Eastern backgrounds have lived in Bulgaria for over five years, some even for decades. Many do not consider themselves “displaced”; often, they

came for job or educational opportunities. Unlike the straightforward message of the promotional video, they are thus neither “refugees,” at least in the legal sense, nor have they recently started “new lives” in Sofia. On the contrary, some began building their lives in Bulgaria decades ago. Others, however, have experienced displacement, and sometimes fled multiple countries—such as Iraqi refugees who first fled war in their home country, and later in Syria.

Taking an “aesthetics of emplacement” approach also allows us to see that none of these experiences and multifaceted trajectories are part of the mural’s visual representation or messaging. Instead, the mural frames an entirely different “common sense” perception. For example, while the mural aims to give visibility to refugee women, it simultaneously makes invisible many others, including Nura, Malika, and Um Omar, who are veiled, but are not refugees. Therefore, the mural reinforces the already wide-spread “default” impression that all women wearing a headscarf are de facto refugees. At the same time, and with the help of targeted messaging, the mural implies that such women’s ultimate desire is to settle and have a home in Bulgaria. Yet, a “common sense” notion that a veiled “refugee” woman could achieve her dreams and self-worth by sitting at a windowsill and tending to flowers presents a surprisingly uncritical rendering of a multifaceted world which women, irrespective of their legal status, have to navigate. The racial dimension of the mural is even more troubling: the depiction of a woman with a uniquely fair complexion is perhaps more suggestive of Bulgarians’ anxiety and intolerance of dark-skinned people than of an actual statement of welcome. The depiction reinforces a prevalent “common sense” message that inclusion is merited on the basis of a particular look, skin color, and disposition. Presciently, such a message foreshadows some of Europe’s attitude and acceptance of “white” Ukrainian refugees only a few years later. What remain invisible are not only the multiplicity of physical appearances of people on the move but also the real-life complexities of movement and settlement, displacement and emplacement. Such complexities and multiplicities are clearly explicated and made visible by people such as our protagonists: light- and dark-skinned women straddling (at least) two worlds, who do not fit standard categories, and are often left to find their own path in the pluriverse of tradition, hierarchy, economic needs, and personal dreams. As Nura’s example shows, starting a family has hardly contributed to her sense of belonging; integration and hospitality are thus not a function of having a “home.” The mural also obscures the critical importance of legal status. Whilst veiled

women are neither automatically eligible for nor necessarily seeking a refugee status, the difficulties in acquiring (an)other legal status still prevent many migrant women from achieving integration, even if they wanted to “integrate” – just think of Malika’s barred path to Bulgarian citizenship.

In our interview, a member of Meeting Point spoke candidly about their contradictory experience with engaging Middle Eastern women in such integration efforts. The mural came about through a series of workshops on homemaking. After the first session, many female participants did not return, often with what-was-described-as vague excuses: “I just didn’t feel like it.” Even though members of the refugee and migrant community had requested such artistic activities, there seemed to be various complications. For example, the women then expected to be picked up from nearby tram and subway stops. This might have been due to previous experiences of racism and unwarranted attention for wearing headscarves; others, until recently, were used to traveling in the city only when accompanied by their husbands. Meeting Point had trouble retaining even those female participants who were accustomed to navigating the public transport in Sofia.

The example, in turn, illustrates a more systemic problem in the Bulgarian humanitarian response. As a representative of Meeting Point elaborated during our interview: “Humanitarian agencies are enabling migrant women to *not* [integrate], by over caring and over giving.” During her previous working experience with Caritas, the NGO representative observed that organizations with international funding used service provision and free transport as incentives to engage with female participants, thus fostering a mentality of aid dependency. The original Arabic of the promotional video also hints at women’s conflicted feelings about such public gestures of homemaking; the Arab speaker’s voice calls into question the possibility of remaking one’s home, saying, “This [the loss of our homes] cannot be compensated.” The English subtitles are a condensed version of the original Arabic, which speaks more at length of women’s nostalgia and longing for lost homes and relatives left behind and dispersed in other countries. Yet, turning once again to the aesthetics of emplacement, it could also be argued that the choice of disengagement with NGO programs, such as the Zhenski Pazar mural, is not a symptom of over-caring, over-giving, or nostalgia. Rather, it is an active choice of how mobile people want to appear visible and recognizable others. In all likelihood, many of the women invited to participate in drawing the

mural did not see the image as representative of their physical, material or social reality. And, in the case of women such as our protagonists, the mural was hardly a reflection of their aspirations and dreams. In the summer of 2021, the mural had been vandalized by graffiti, and Meeting Point was preparing to repair it.



Image 5: A detail of Meeting Point's mural in Zhenski Pazar, central Sofia. Photograph: Ann-Christin Zuntz, 2021.

CONCLUSION

In the promotional video of Meeting Point's mural, an Arab woman explains that "home is freedom and safety." The expression might appear common-sensical. Yet, as our article shows, a definition of any of these three terms, home-freedom-safety, is far from straightforward. Indeed, Syrian women in Sofia emplace themselves in complex and sometimes contradictory ways: Nura came to Bulgaria looking for a home but only found it in her workplace, Um Omar fears that her home is falling apart and thus brings in a Syrian bride from a war zone to fix it, while Malika feels "at home" wherever her parents are. To these women, emplacement is their continued ability to make the best of their circumstances, as well as contingencies and uncertainties, especially when ideas of "home" do not work out. At the same time, we demonstrated that establishing a family home and entering the workplace are not equivalent to integrating into the host society, as

these may anchor Syrian women in transnational and diasporic, rather than local, communities. Importantly, then, our protagonists' emplacements happen at the local level, but against a backdrop of transnational experiences and networks, including marital and trade migrations, and more recently displacement, from Syria to the Balkans. Instead of finding a new home, it is the ability to "make oneself at home" and make decisions about one's life and surroundings that shape how Syrian women experience their migration to Sofia. As Hage puts it, successful homemaking comes with a "sense of possibility."⁶⁴ For our protagonists, life in Bulgaria was invested with hopes, and some of these hopes have dissipated over time, giving way to new migration projects and new mobilities. Only one of the three protagonists of this article envisions her future in Bulgaria. Malika, a university graduate with a stable job and a supportive family, dreams of finishing her university degree in Aleppo. But in the meantime, "Bulgaria has become like my second country, I got used to living here." The same is not true for Um Omar, even though she has spent the last thirty years of her life in Sofia, speaks Bulgarian fluently, and owns her flat. Yet the moment the microphone was switched off after her interview, she turned to Zuntz and said, "Now I would like to ask *you* a question: How would one go about migrating to western Europe?" In the summer of 2021, Um Omar was busy facilitating her niece's marital migration from Lebanon to Sofia, but she was also concerned about the lack of job prospects for her son. "Honestly, we want to leave this country, I don't know where. Maybe to Belgium or to Germany [where she has relatives]. My son will learn the language and find work." Through her contact with the newly emerged humanitarian system in Sofia, where Um Omar can now access language classes and other forms of vocational training, the marital migrant has now also "become a refugee" in her own way. This has made her more aware of other Syrians' onward movements and roused her interest in migration to western Europe. As for Nura, her most urgent concern is financing her medical procedure in Turkey, but in her daydreams, she also imagines herself living on her own, without her husband. Once again, the distinction between "refugees" and "migrants" becomes relevant: unlike displaced people on the run, the permanent residency in Bulgaria that their migrant status affords our protagonists gives them the luxury to weigh their options for the future. Ultimately, Syrians' ongoing transnational connections in this part of the world create opportunities for movement in good and bad times. Legally and practically, however, the mobility of Syrian wives

and daughters still hinges on patriarchal connections, and thus remains of little interest to receiving states.

Localized case studies, such as this research on Syrian displacement and emplacement in Sofia, inform understandings of the bigger picture: the Middle East not as a refugee-producing region in need of top-down “development” but as a part of the world that is already deeply embedded in historical and ongoing flows of people, goods, and money, which continue even in times of conflict and hardened borders. Policymakers and humanitarian actors focus on south-north movements of migrants and refugees, but they overlook that such migrations follow in the footsteps of more longstanding trade connections crisscrossing the Mediterranean. Big tech companies’ outsourcing of IT services to refugee and migrant workers in the Balkans, i.e. people who do not easily fit into the Bulgarian labor market but who bring sought-after language skills, adds another layer of complexity to an already globalized region. This matters because it helps us understand how global capitalism keeps incorporating marginalized workforces. After all, Syrian families on the move are more than economic pawns. In addition, their old and new entanglements with trade and borders also rewire intimate kinship relations, family values, and marital strategies, while remodeling how they are seen by others in shared public places. The story of Syrian women in Sofia, then, is not simply a story about conflict-induced displacement but rather about how people use movement and mobile homemaking to carve out a place for themselves in a world shaped by multiple forms of social and economic displacement.

NOTES

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² To protect our Syrian participants, all names have been anonymized.

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