

A desire for normality: (early) marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan between waiting and home-making

This paper discusses practices of early marriage in protracted displacement, among Syrian refugees in Jordan, while drawing from ethnographic research with one extended family in Amman. The dominant form of early marriage is often glossed over as a common, traditional practice. The increase of early marriage among Syrians in Jordan is often explained as the result of a search for economic relief by the family. This article adds to this analysis by offering a new in-depth reading of early marriage practices. It first shows how an emic differentiation is made between ordinary and ethically challenging forms of early marriage. Second, it aims to render visible additional dimensions of early marriage by showing how refugees actively shape their lives in the liminal state between waiting and home-making. I argue that marriage can act as a normaliser and signify a desire for an ordinary family life that fulfils social and affective needs of home-making in contexts of forced displacement.

Key words refugees, marriage, home-making, ethics, Middle-East

Introduction

This paper discusses the practice of early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan based on qualitative research and ethnographic work with one extended family in Amman, Jordan's capital. International agencies focus on improving efforts that aim to reduce or prevent cases of marriage under the age of 18 and often miss in-depth understanding of social context, histories as well as contemporary socio-economic or political dynamics that are at play (e.g. Archambault 2011; Ngo 2002). While their concern lies with upholding strict, legalistic understandings of childhood, adulthood and children's rights, I aim in this paper to portray the dynamics of social, political and economic forces that shape understandings of (early) marriage among my informants (Grabska et al. 2018).

Jordanian and international humanitarian agencies gave attention to gendered practices from early on in the Syrian refugee crisis that started in 2011. The number of Syrian refugees in Jordan who are registered by UNHCR as 'people of concern' totals 660,393, making up 11.7% of the Jordanian population. The government of Jordan has made much higher estimates but does not provide its sources or calculations and these numbers are therefore considered unreliable (Lenner and Schmelter 2016; Bank 2016: 3). An overwhelming majority of refugees, about 80%, live in urban areas in the Northern governorates of Mafrqa, Irbid, Zarqa and the capital Amman (Lenner and Schmelter 2016: 124). Others live in five camps that have been set up and are run by UNHCR and are located in the Northern governorates as well. Reports have been dedicated to the plight of women and children (UN Women 2013) and showed that the number of registered Syrian marriages involving girls under the age of 18 had increased remarkably (Save the Children 2014; UNICEF 2014; Higher Population Council Jordan 2017). The percentage of registered marriages among underage Syrian girls in

Jordan rose especially between 2011 and 2015, notably from 18.4% in 2011 to 34.6% in 2015 (Higher Population Council Jordan 2017: xv–xvi).

Scholar of forced migration Dawn Chatty deplores that UNHCR interventions insufficiently consult with host societies or displaced people themselves to understand and address their needs (Chatty 2017: 27). The needs and vulnerability assessments that are designed by UNHCR and implemented by local (non-)governmental partners are based on Western conceptualisations of the individual, of personal agency and vulnerability, she asserts, that ‘serve to validate the perceptions of the service providers rather than the “targeted community” or beneficiaries’ (Chatty 2017: 27–8). The early mention of a ‘child marriage crisis’ in 2012 was for her an example of such processes in which Western conceptualisations one-sidedly redefine a common social practice into a problematic social crisis that needs our attention.

Chatty’s critique may sound too sweeping or in need of further contextualisation and refinement. However, she points at crucial concerns that are usually overlooked when operating by legalistic understandings of childhood, adulthood and children’s rights. It is important to be aware of the mechanisms behind the ‘presentation of the problem’ of early marriage by international agencies and policy makers (Bacchi 2009). The manner in which a social phenomenon is presented as a policy problem reveals the underlying norms that one seeks to impose. Here, concerns of extending (inter) national governance over women’s reproductive capacities and their understandings of proper family formation may outbalance concerns about their overall safety, well-being and recognition of actual needs (Van Raemdonck and de Regt 2020).

In contrast to problematising early marriage, this article suggests to consider early marriage among displaced communities from an angle that is usually overlooked, notably as a desired normality and wilful continuation of one’s life course. Various reports recognise that early marriage in many regions in Syria has been a common practice that was passed on to generations but do not seem to take this further into account in analysis or recommendations for policy interventions. In contrast, I aim to pause and question what this implies in lived reality. What exactly does it mean that early marriage has been a common, ordinary practice, especially for those who have left their homeland and live a life in displacement under straining and ‘unusual’ conditions of uncertainty? My argument is that early marriage as an act of home-making can have a powerful pull in a social context that discourages refugees from settling and taking root. Reports have pointed out that one of the major reasons for early marriage among Syrians in Jordan is economic relief for the family. This paper aims to shed light on other, less-known dimensions. It discusses the potential social and affective consequences of early marriage in the frame of home-making and against the backdrop of coping with a generally straining and stressful environment. My aim is not to present this as a general rule, nor to be in denial of the many potential hazardous consequences of early marriage but rather to discuss a social reality that usually remains invisible.

From transnational marriage to marriage in displacement and home-making

This article focuses on marriage practices among a particular group of refugees: Syrian refugees in forced displacement in Jordan. Jordan may become the country they settle

in for the rest of their lives or may be a transitory place before moving to a third country or returning to Syria. Research on marriage among displaced groups of refugees living under uncertain conditions is very scarce. Syrians in Jordan marry especially with other Syrians who are also displaced refugees. The selections of spouses, registration of marriage and wedding festivities are all held in Jordan. These conditions contrast with the strong focus on transnationalism that is common in literature on marriage among migrants and refugees. A lot of related scholarship has focused on different forms of marriage migration, including transnational and cross-border marriage (e.g. Williams 2010; Maunaguru 2019; Shaw and Charsley 2006; Liberatore 2017; Grabska 2010).

Lucy Williams has made a distinction between cross-border marriage and transnational marriage. This is helpful because the categories foreground different aspects of marriage in migration context. Cross-border migrant spouses obtain a change in official immigration status in their new country of residence, and gain more security, as a result of marriage. However, such couples are characterised by a fundamental political and often economic inequality as one partner already has citizenship status and the other has not (Williams 2010: 5). In the context of this study, we could speak of cross-border marriage migration when a Syrian national would marry a Jordanian national, regardless whether the Syrian spouse already resides in Jordan or not. The concept of transnational marriage, on the other hand, locates marriage amid other activities of well-established transnational communities (e.g. Charsley and Shaw 2006). Marriage is then first of all perceived as a practice among others 'by which family and kin-based structures are preserved, traditional institutions and practices maintained and reciprocal relationships, that include marriage, kept up' (Williams 2010: 9). Such marriages form a sort of bridge between a community dispersed across national borders. In the context at hand, this term would refer to marriages between Syrians in Jordan and Syrians residing in Syria who migrate to Jordan to share their lives with their spouses.

In sum, studies of cross-border marriages (when a difference in citizenship status between partners occurs) and transnational marriages (when both partners have a cultural, national or ethnic community in common) have received most attention in the literature. In contrast, studies of marriage within refugee communities, who were by definition forced to leave their homes, remain scarce. Research on transnational marriage among refugees has shown how marriage can serve as a strategy to reunite with community members or to bring people to safety, but just as much as a means to meet basic human emotional needs (Maunaguru 2019; Shaw and Charsley 2006). Maunaguru's ethnography of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees pointed to the importance of future perspectives and expectations of certainty that are brought about by the process of marriage. While his work focused on transnational marriage brokerage and the different steps involved in the marriage migration process, the Tamil refugees share with the Syrian community in Jordan an approach to marriage as a means to acquire more certainty over an uncertain life. For them as well, marriage signifies a desire for a future and an ordinary life against the background of war violence and the felt absence of family members dispersed across continents (Maunaguru 2019: 14–16). Transnational marriage among refugees may help to strengthen the connection to the country of settlement and differentiate oneself from their 'old home' (Liberatore 2017) or, rather maintain a sense of cultural identity associated to the home country (Grabska 2010; Williams 2010: 142). Communities that traditionally favour cousin marriage, such as the Pakistani British, have been shown to favour a continuation of this practice for a

variety of reasons, including kinship obligation, socio-economic strategy and emotional belonging (Shaw and Charsley 2006).

Research on local refugee marriage practices in displacement, as opposed to transnational, is scarce, especially in contexts of protracted displacement where a sense of being a distinct community in a new country is still developing. This study should be seen against this backdrop. It focuses on (early) marriages among displaced Syrian refugees in Jordan that often take place among far relatives, acquaintances, previous pre-war neighbours or hometown inhabitants who reside in Jordan. This article suggests that Syrian refugees in Jordan marry not consciously with the aim of building or maintaining cultural identity, but rather that the very act of marrying is an expression of home culture and serves as a home-making gesture, especially marriage under the age of 18, which is actively being discouraged by the international aid community and the state of Jordan. My aim is twofold: through ethnographic description I will show how my interlocutors establish a difference between ordinary and extraordinary cases of early marriage. Second, I will demonstrate how ordinary early marriage can be understood as an appealing act of home-making against the backdrop of interrupted lives coping with economic hardships in an often unwelcoming and socially alienating environment.

I argue that for refugees in displacement, marriage can play a powerful role as a normaliser of a life-in-flux. Similar to the asylum seekers in Western countries that Lucy Williams studied, Syrians in my fieldwork context aspired to marriage as a normalisation of life and placed it in contrast to 'the chaotic nature of [the] life' they knew (Williams 2010: 149). Marital life promises an ordinary everyday life in overall conditions that are infused with political, economic and social uncertainties. Attempting to restore an ordinary life is therefore equally an act of home-making in a seemingly unfavourable and transient environment. Scholarship that interrogates the meanings of home and home-making in contexts of migration often assumed a logic of leaving one place for another, while more recently, there has been a growing focus on experiences of liminal in-between experiences of time and space among (trans)migrants, asylum seekers and those forcibly displaced (e.g. Al-Ali and Koser 2004; Echeverri Zuluaga 2015; Horst and Grabska 2015). This article connects to central concerns of such scholarship and perceives home-making in displacement as acts that are necessarily characterised by ambivalence. It seeks to highlight efforts to create home in routine day-to-day practices (Brun and Fabos 2015), taking as a departure point the recognition of the great importance of family for Syrians, as well as for many others, for their overall well-being and their understanding of home (Simich et al. 2010; Joseph 1999).

Methodology

This research has been conducted within the frame of a larger collaborative anthropological research project on early marriage and sexual and reproductive health and rights among Syrian refugees in Jordan. The project investigates the shifting meanings, perceptions and interventions on early marriage among Syrians in Jordan. To answer the main research questions, the project relied on a set of qualitative research methods, such as recurring group talks based on participatory action research, in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups and ethnography. In this article, I rely solely on my own ethnography while the data obtained through these other methods

have equally shaped the ways in which I entered ethnographic settings. The research participants in the recurring talk groups and focus groups, for instance, discussed the many shapes and forms that (early) marriage can take (Van Raemdonck and de Regt 2020). I entered ethnographic settings while being aware of the high variety of practices that are caught under the umbrella term of early marriage and aimed to get a better understanding of the everyday life of early married couples when living in close proximity to their extended family members.

My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of regular meetings and engagements with the family members' daily lives over the course of a little more than a year (between March 2018 and May 2019). I shared many lunches, day excursions and evening gatherings in the homes of one (extended) family residing in close proximity to each other in Amman. I accompanied my main informants to doctor visits, school administration obligations, shopping and afternoon leisure activities in the city. I was introduced to this particular family through a Palestinian NGO worker who I approached to offer volunteer work. In spring 2018, the organisation's founder introduced me to two families in Amman and the family of Umm Mohammad was one of them.

Ordinary marriage: when conditions of suitability are met

On my first visit in February 2018 when I met Umm Mohammad and her family, I listened to them recounting the three and a half months they spent in Zaatari camp on their arrival in 2012. Umm Mohammad's husband died years before 2011 in a traffic accident and she undertook the journey alone from the governorate of Damascus while being responsible for five small children, 'I managed to keep them all safe and raise them, thank God'. We sit in the modest living room of her rental house in one of al-Hussayn camp's narrow numbered streets, an old urbanised Palestinian refugee camp in Northern Amman that is now mainly populated by Syrians. Four mattresses lie along the four walls of the room and a small TV sits in a corner, raised and supported by pillows. Her children join in telling stories of Zaatari. There were no caravans yet. They suffered from a lack of water, the inability to clean themselves and wash their clothes. Especially, Aida and Basma, her two unmarried daughters of 18 and 15, talk about their experiences vividly and excited as if they were part of some wild adventures. I would hear the same style and tone of voice again later when talking about other difficult events and I remained surprised by their lightness and gaiety. This style conflicted with the overwhelmingly sad imagery that I was used to and usually accompanies media reports and aid organisations' representations of refugees' journeys.

Aida sat next to me and showed pictures of her aunts and uncles abroad, dispersed over Germany, the UK and Canada. I see pictures of her sister Muna and her two sons: 'she is one year younger than me', she says. Muna married when she was 15 and gave birth to two children in the following two years. Especially Aida and Basma are always eager to show me pictures and videos of the two baby boys and tell me fresh stories after every visit. Muna and her family live in a separate housing unit in another part of Amman, while other most relatives live in close proximity. Months later, Umm Mohammad recounts how she got to know Muna's husband and how she decided to marry her. They knew him and his family very well since they had been neighbours and

friends in Damascus. 'His mother was my close friend', she says, 'and his grandparents were friends with my parents', drawing an imaginary long line of friendship and familiarity in the air with her finger. In Jordan, when Muna turned 15 and he proposed, she readily accepted and Muna did not object. There was enough trust and confidence that this bond would be successful and stable. After marriage, she would grow to love him.

Being 15 and staying home (no longer attending school) often signifies to society that one is at a marriageable age and ready to receive proposals from suitors, I am told. This is a common understanding in Syria and Umm Mohammad continued it in Jordan as well. This marriage also meant to imply economic relief: as head of the household and raising five children, she heavily relies on aid from different NGOs. As soon as Muna established her own household, her mother felt reassured that she provided her with a good future. Umm Mohammed suggests that her marriage would have occurred along similar lines if the family had remained in Syria under peaceful circumstances.

Aida, Muna's elder sister by one year, received a proposal one year ago from a young man who lives with his family in the neighbourhood. Umm Mohamed initially approved of Aida's engagement but soon ended it. She speaks assertively and shows that she takes full responsibility for her decision. Aida's suitor did not have a sustainable job and therefore would not have been able to provide for her and their future children. They reviewed the engagement in spring, when her suitor had found another job and would even obtain Jordanian nationality, but her mother broke it off again. Umm Mohamed remains doubtful about his willingness and ability to keep a job and provide a stable income and second, her prospective mother-in-law insists that Aida works on her body shape and loses weight before marriage. Each time I return from travelling, Aida stands in front of me, placing her hands on her hips and asking 'can you tell the difference?' Training her body had been a tough demand and her entire family agreed that she had to lose body weight to fit the image of a suitable bride. Her uncles and brothers are relentless in teasingly making cruel jokes about her body shape as a sign of the seriousness of the matter. One of her uncles, Munir, loves to advise her on exercise and dieting, leaving her silent.

Normality, the ordinary and ethics

I was initially struck by the normality with which Aida's looks and body shape were problematised as a condition to marry, and second, how ordinary it was to have a daughter or a sister who marries at age 15 and starts a family of her own. Understandings of normality are similar to 'the ordinary' by its implicit unconscious unquestioning nature. Michael Lambek argues that the explanatory power of the idea of an ethics of the ordinary in everyday life may exceed that of analyses of larger structures and interests. It refers to people's everyday ethical judgements and actions. It is often unspoken because it is 'grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself' (Lambek 2010: 2). It refers to those moments when people implicitly or unwittingly perform ethical behaviour, and differs from those moments when ethics turns explicit, that is when there is openly doubt, disagreement and discussion about what is the good and right thing to do.

The common practice of (early) marriage is indeed a social agreement and practice rather than an explicit rule or conscious belief that organises sexuality, gender

and family formation. Suad Joseph among others showed that family relations are vital arrangements in the social fabric of Arab societies and for the individual's understanding of the self (Joseph 1999). These arrangements are not fixed but are subject to change and contestation and just as definitions of sexuality, they have particular 'social and historical sources' (Weeks 2017: 4). What is seen as normal or abnormal in any given place or time is a social definition. Sexual activities are integrated into larger social scripts where meaning and sexual behaviour come together (Simon and Gagnon 2011: 4). Sexual conduct as regulated by (early) marriage obtains its meaning from and in interaction with existing social scripts. Social scripts can then either be experienced as supportive or repressive, depending on particular individuals and contexts.

Muna's marriage at the age of 15 and her current life as a young mother fit a social script that is familiar to Syrian communities and belongs therefore to the realm of normality and the ordinary, rather than the explicitly ethical. This does not mean that it cannot be qualified as an ethical act or as having ethical consequences. Her marriage, however, was seen as a normal and ordinary act and there was no perceived need to debate or question what was the right thing to do. Match-making is defined by a number of considerations and based on well-established ideas in the community about suitability. Similar to the Pakistani British community, cousin-marriage is often preferred over other forms of marriage. The thought that marriage 'inside the family' offers the most secure route to a happy and secure life is very popular (Shaw and Charsley 2006: 411). In Muna's case, the family's generation-long familiarity and friendship with Muna's suitor's family provided the needed reassurance that he will be reliable and able to offer a good and stable life. The normality of Muna's marriage contrasts with another decision of marriage within the family that was experienced as challenging and extraordinary.

The 'extraordinary': Maysa

Over the course of several fieldwork stays I could follow the family's discussions of the marriage decision of Maysa, a 13-year-old cousin of Aida and Basma who lives in Aleppo. I first meet her father, Abu Khaled, during a family gathering at Umm Mohammad's mother's flat to celebrate their moving into this building. Now Umm Mohammad and her family occupy the second floor and her mother together with Munir and his family live on the first floor. This is an easier arrangement than living each in separate housing units across the camp. Abu Khaled looks preoccupied and smokes his cigarettes tucked away in a corner of the living room. Maysa is his [then] 12-year-old daughter from his previous marriage who lives in Aleppo, 'alone', he says. His ex-wife in Syria died one year ago because of war violence and he lives with his current wife and three children in Jordan. Maysa has been without caretakers since her mother's death and has been temporarily staying at the homes of different relatives. His attempts to bring his daughter to Jordan failed and left him in bitter anger and sadness. Jordanian administrators rejected her entry into the country. 'This is not fair', he says, 'they should allow her to enter the country and join her father, just like any Western state would do that respects children's rights'. The situation is unbearable for him. Soon, she will turn 13 and he feels pressure from his relatives in Syria to find another solution for her.

A few days later at a Friday lunch gathering at Abu Khaled's home, Maysa is subject of debate the entire day and everyone is engaged with each other sharing opinions. One of Umm Mohammad's sisters, who lives in another part of Amman, enters a heated conversation with the family relative caretaker in Syria by sending voice-messages on WhatsApp back and forth. Umm Mohammad's mother joins in the WhatsApp talk. She thinks it would be a shame to have to marry Maysa off so young, but she does not see any other solution. Aida says that Maysa stays with 'just anybody' – '*alam*' – (literally 'the world' in Arabic), and that this situation can obviously not continue. She suggests that staying with '*alam*', who are in fact distant relatives, leaves too much openness and possibility for sexual and moral transgressions by Maysa or by anyone who may abuse her unusual and vulnerable situation. Some, including her father, say that Maysa herself states that she is willing and prepared (*'radya'*) to marry. After a while, the debate starts to bore Aida and Basma and they urge me to leave for a nicer activity – it is Friday afternoon after all. We leave the talks and visit the mall for a few hours, but on our return the discussions continued among Umm Mohammed and her siblings.

A few months later, Aida shows me the pictures on her phone of all the events I had missed, including Maysa's wedding pictures. I see a slender young bride and bridegroom dancing on their wedding party, and smiling to the camera in their new candlelit bedroom decorated with red roses. Abu Khaled and his relatives in Aleppo had approved of a 19-year-old husband, who they knew and trusted, Aida reassures me. Umm Mohammed's mother [teta] and Aida's prospective mother-in-law sit in front of me while we share dinner. I look at teta and tell her that I remember the long talks earlier and ask whether it was a hard decision to make. She pauses for a few seconds and repeats what I heard earlier 'she was not allowed into Jordan. Is it not better to be in a stable house than to stay around with different people?' She implies that a young girl entering marriageable age, by turning 13, should know social stability and live in the company of either caretakers or with her own husband and family. It is not considered appropriate within dominant gender and sexuality norms for young women to not be surrounded by a stable protective social environment (e.g. Hélie and Hoodfar 2012; Censi 2015; Dupret 2001).

This decision had divided family members but a majority agreed that arranging a marriage was ultimately the best for Maysa. It raised explicit ethical questions and family members weighed the arguments for and against. Their disagreements tell us that this was not an ordinary event but a marriage that was unusual and for some, undesired. However, certain social scripts that give meaning to marriage and socially arrange sexuality, gender and family life were more powerful than the undesirability of this particular case of early marriage. It stands in contrast with the ordinary early marriage starting from the age of 15 (as discussed through the case of Muna) that corresponds more closely to Syrian generational and regional histories of marriage.

Home-making as affective processes of creating intimacy and belonging

Here I turn to the meanings of maintaining regimes of normality in conditions that are unusual and often stressful in forced displacement. Earlier I discussed the marriage of Muna, Umm Mohammed's daughter. Umm Mohammed's youngest brother, Munir,

similarly married his wife, Ghazal, when she was 15, now three years ago. How can we understand these practices that are often referred to as common, traditional marriage in the particular context of forced displacement? Did the new post-migration context alter the social meaning of early marriage?

The Syrian crisis in Jordan has developed into protracted displacement and a great many Syrian asylum seekers aspire to resettle in a third country. It has been widely demonstrated how uncertainty and waiting are often central to asylum seekers' and refugees' lives after forced displacement (Echeverri Zuluaga 2015; Horst and Grabska 2015). After exile, refugees find themselves in a liminal state that is characterised by hope and waiting. The conditions of the present time may be transitory or lasting. Munir experiences this state as if his life is set on hold. He wishes to leave Jordan as soon as possible with his wife and two children and is continuously in search of information that can help him to reach this goal. He worked in construction in Syria and wishes to pursue further education, which is difficult and expensive in Jordan and an important motivation to look for better opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, working opportunities in Jordan are very restricted. Syrians can apply for working permits within a particular selection of professions (Lenner and Turner 2019). Each time we meet, he delves straight into politics, life in Europe and the promises of freedom that he senses in the idea of migration. The present is defined by feelings of being stuck and lack of control. Over the last year, he focused on losing body weight by adopting a new diet and exercising. He is proud of his achievements, losing more than ten kilos and feeling much better. His focus on exerting control over his body seems a substitute for his lack of free mobility, and maybe this relates to his harsh encouragement of Aida to follow his example.

I have understood his decision to marry in an overall state of protracted uncertainty as another form of a desire to continue and affirm life. Forced migration scholar Cathrine Brun introduced the notion of 'agency-in-waiting' to denote the particular combination of feeling stuck in the present, being uncertain about the future but simultaneously actively shaping life, based on her research among internally displaced Georgians (Brun 2015). 'We want to live our lives, we want to move forward. Here we are stuck'. Munir often concluded a long talk about life in Europe in this way, apologetically explaining his relentless inquiries for opportunities. He believes that resettlement abroad would offer more options to advance in life and this means ideally to continue education, to work and expand his family. His wife wants to have more children and he refused because he deems the current situation in Jordan unacceptable: 'In Europe we would be able to move forward. In this situation, two [children] is good and enough, and we can have more later after migration'. Despite the many limitations of the current situation, Munir decided three years ago when he was in his early twenties to live and marry as it is expected in ordinary times. He made a conscious choice to actively create meaning, in denial or refusal of the overwhelming restraining circumstances that are otherwise dominating. In this manner, he defies both the common understanding of protracted displacement as a mode of passively waiting and policies that follow a binary understanding of home (being 'put back in the proper place') and away (being displaced) (Brun and Fabos 2015: 10). Marriage then becomes an act of home-making in a time and space that does not invite or welcome such acts.

Munir had felt a desire to 'normalise' his situation. Lucy Williams described how the asylum seekers in the West whom she studied spoke of marriage as 'an absolute necessity'. For them it signified a sort of beginning of actual life after finishing the

tiresome asylum procedures (Williams 2010: 148–9). I recognised a similar urge in Munir's narrative to move on along life's path with as less delay as possible. His restless impatience is entirely linked with his desire to shape the future, and indeed, marriage offers a promise of future life script and guides expectancies. For Tamil refugees in diaspora, Maunaguru documented the crucial importance of futurity in their transnational marriage decisions and processes. He touched on crucial aspects of marriage among refugees and displaced people as 'not just a strategy to escape the war, but also an effort to inhabit the world, to make uncertainty into certainty, and to imagine a future' (Maunaguru 2019: 15).

Marriage for Syrians in Jordan is often a very long road replete with many obstacles. Living in Jordan as a young male refugee often means dropping out of school in order to start work from as early as the age of 12 or younger in order to provide for themselves and their families. The harsh economic and material circumstances do not welcome or facilitate home-making but rather provide stagnation and feelings of being trapped and stuck. Munir has been able to surmount those obstacles with the help of financial aid from his family. Indeed, the ability to maintain a seemingly ordinary family life has been central to this family's well-being in Jordan. Umm Mohammad meets with her siblings on a very regular basis and all make spontaneous visits to each other's houses to share lunches, dinners or evening tea. They discuss news of relatives who live abroad, in Europe and Syria. There is a constant exchange of information concerning visits to UNHCR, news about policy changes, and about neighbours or acquaintances who received phone calls from UNHCR offering an opportunity for resettlement. The news about who accepts and refuses resettlement opportunities is shared and received with indignation, jealousy, anger or indifference. Family and neighbours circulate updates about places in the area to be avoided, when, for instance, a harasser has been noted in a certain district. Birthdays are celebrated together, and when finances allow, the main holidays remain associated with short leisurely excursions, together. In sum, this extended family network serves not only the exchange of information, but also provides significant social support, emotional belonging and a physical safety net, that resembles as much as possible pre-war ordinary life. It enables the circulation of 'a positive sentiment of affection' among family members (Shaw and Charsley 2006: 406). Sharing ordinary family activities takes up most of the time in the lives of Umm Mohammed's daughters Aida and Basma, the family members I grew to know most intimately. It structures their days and creates meaning and joy.

In other words, ordinary family life offers affective and intimate bonds that are crucial to feelings of belonging and home. A burgeoning scholarship has looked at the notion of 'home' from a variety of perspectives, in contexts of migration and displacement, and in more abstract phenomenological approaches. Hart and Ben-Yoseph note that while it seemingly represents 'a universal human yearning for being grounded, for being safe, for belonging, it cannot be fenced in by a single definition or approach' (2014: 2). A sense of belonging and a yearning for being grounded is, needless to say, particularly difficult to fulfil under conditions of immobility, uncertainty and waiting. It was noted that migrant communities often aim to realise a sense of belonging by reproducing or reinventing 'traditions' that are associated with home (Al-Ali and Koser 2004: 7), such as cousin marriage (Shaw and Charsley 2006). Etsuko Kinefuchi remarks that in order to grasp the meanings of 'home' in contexts of migration, we need to move beyond the question of self-understanding

and identity. What matters most, she argues, is its symbolic meaning: 'Emotionally, [home] invokes our belonging, desire, memory and a firm point of return, comfort, safety, and intense emotional relationships' (Kinefuchi 2010: 231). Indeed, making home is not merely a recreation of the once familiar and traditional in a new space. Kinefuchi rightly points at the ability to create and shape possibly new affective bonds, belonging and relations in order to feel home again. Home-making then involves recreating the needed settings and conditions to feel home relationally and affectively. Having access to affective relations and social support is not only associated with 'home', but also plays a crucial role in refugees' overall well-being and mental health (Simich et al. 2010).

Marrying and creating a new family within the embrace of the larger extended family, as Muna and Muna did and Aida aspires to do, is an illustration of how this desire for belonging can be fulfilled. Suad Joseph and others have pointed at the centrality of family and relationality in Arab countries for formations of the self and one's identity (e.g. Hasso 2011, Joseph 1999). Self-realisation for many is tightly bound to family relating. Munir lives in the close presence of his mother, elder sisters and brothers and their families. Some of his relatives have been resettled (in the UK, Canada and Germany) and he also hopes for resettlement. Yet, while being in the position of waiting, he engages in home-making practices by marrying and starting a family in displacement, enabling him to make an ordinary family life as he would have known in Syria. On the level of ordinary life, Rapport and Dawson asserted that 'home is more tangible in certain routine sets of practices, specific rituals and habitual social interaction' (Rapport and Dawson 1998). Indeed, marrying and starting a family enables the establishment of new emotional bonds and the opportunity of continuing routine activities with family members. In short, for displaced people, home often means any place 'in which a "normal" life can be created and lived' (Eastmond 2006: 144).

Conclusion

Studies often gloss over early marriage as a common, traditional practice and not rarely in a bid to denounce this custom as inhibiting societal growth and progress. I hope to show why this 'common' practice is particularly worthy of our attention under 'uncommon' and unusual circumstances of forced displacement. While economic relief is often mentioned as the main motive for the rise of early marriages among Syrian refugees in Jordan, what remains invisible are the potential affective bonds, social support and meaning-giving arrangements that underlie what is considered to be ordinary marriage. With this detailed ethnographic account, I challenge the more dominant figure of the young Syrian child bride who is made to marry against her will by a family that is pushed by dire economic circumstances and concerns about their daughter's personal safety. Without ignoring the reality of forced marriages, this article aims to offer more insight into the overwhelming majority of 'common' marriages and explain their values and pull for young women and men. Similar to Shaw and Charsley (2006), who challenged the figure of the British Pakistani woman forced into transnational marital arrangements, this account is more interested in the underlying motives for the popularity of such practices and finds that establishing social support and emotional connection are crucial.

This article argues that we can understand early marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan also from the perspective of a desire for normality and ordinary life while enduring straining conditions of protracted uncertainty and immobility. Drawing on in-depth ethnographic work with one Syrian extended family, I show how my interlocutors established a differentiation between an ordinary early marriage and an ethically challenging early marriage. Women from the age of 15 can be perceived as potential brides and ready to start families of their own. When girls are younger (between 13 and 15), the decision to marry becomes an explicit ethical question that requires argument and debate. This age is seen as ethically undesirable and marriage occurs only when other crucial social scripts on gender, sexuality and family overrule this ethical objection.

Within these established understandings of the ordinary, marriage itself is a desirable moment that enables girls and boys to transition into adulthood and take up responsibility. This transition has often started prematurely in contexts of forced displacement by living through war and violence, undertaking unsafe migratory journeys, economic hardship and experiencing social alienation in the host society. Everyday life for my interlocutors largely revolves around family life. The presence and needs of other family members structure women and men's daily occupations, activities and social relations. Sharing everyday activities in each other's company creates meaning and joy in an overall environment that is often felt as untrustworthy, risky and unpredictable.

Early marriage for my interlocutors can therefore be regarded as a home-making practice that has a powerful pull for those living in stressful and uncertain conditions. Particularly in contexts of forced migration, it enables young women and men to establish emotional relational bonds through engagement in ordinary everyday routine activities. Further in-depth anthropological research would be needed to gain more insight into Syrians' marriage choices, especially in contexts where international aid organisations rapidly define social problems, set policy agendas and design interventions. The recognition of the potential social and affective significance of home-making that follows from marriage and family formation may contribute to designing policy interventions more adequately, truthfully and better oriented toward early married women and family needs.

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Désir de normalité: Le mariage (précoce) chez les réfugiés syriens en Jordanie entre l'attente et la création d'un foyer

Cet article traite des pratiques de mariage précoce dans les déplacements prolongés, chez les réfugiés syriens en Jordanie, tout en s'appuyant sur une recherche ethnographique avec une famille élargie à Amman. La forme dominante de mariage précoce est souvent occultée comme une pratique traditionnelle courante. L'augmentation des mariages précoces chez les Syriens en Jordanie est souvent expliquée comme le résultat d'une recherche de soulagement économique par la famille. Cet article complète cette analyse en proposant une nouvelle lecture approfondie des pratiques de mariage précoce. Il montre d'abord comment une distinction est faite entre les formes ordinaires et les formes éthiquement difficiles de mariage précoce. Ensuite, il vise à rendre visible des dimensions supplémentaires du mariage précoce en montrant comment les réfugiés façonnent activement leur vie dans l'état limite entre l'attente et la création d'un foyer. Je soutiens que le mariage peut agir comme un normalisateur et signifier le désir d'une vie familiale ordinaire qui répond aux besoins sociaux et affectifs de la création d'un foyer dans des contextes de déplacement forcé.

Mots-clés réfugiés, mariage, ménage, éthique, Moyen-Orient