



# A Double-Edged Sword? The Role of Digital Technologies in Marriage and Divorce Among Syrian Refugees in Northern Jordan

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how young Syrian refugees in Jordan who have grown up using information and new communication technologies are using the internet as a private space where emotions and practices regarding intimate and marital life are expressed. We explore how new technologies and social media are influencing refugees' perceptions and experiences of marriage and divorce during displacement. Based on in-depth interviews with rural Syrian women from Deraa province living in northern Jordan, our research sheds light on the multi-faceted ways these women embrace emerging technologies. Furthermore, we demonstrate how technology influences gender-specific narratives and practices around marriage and divorce.

## KEYWORDS

refugees; marriage; divorce; forced migration; digital technologies; mobile phones

## RÉSUMÉ


Cet article explore la manière dont les jeunes réfugiés syriens en Jordanie, qui ont grandi en utilisant les technologies de l'information et de la communication, se servent d'Internet comme d'un espace privé où s'expriment les émotions et les pratiques relatives à la vie intime et conjugale. Nous nous penchons sur la manière dont les nouvelles technologies et les médias sociaux influencent les perceptions et les expériences des réfugiés en matière de mariage et de divorce au cours de leur déplacement. À partir d'entrevues approfondies avec des femmes syriennes rurales de la province de Deraa vivant dans le nord de la Jordanie, notre recherche met en lumière les multiples façons dont ces femmes adoptent les technologies émergentes. En outre, nous démontrons comment la technologie influence les récits et les pratiques genrées autour du mariage et du divorce.

## INTRODUCTION


Technology is important in our lives. Technology offers many opportunities and is an invention that has facilitated human life. Technology also offers the possibility to interact socially, and it may give support and assistance to the modern human being. We choose what suits us. However, it is a double-edged sword because it has negative and positive sides.

This quote is from a young Syrian refugee woman who lives in a small village in northern Jordan. The outbreak of war in Syria in March 2011 displaced more than half the country's population, which was at that time estimated at 22.5 million (Abbara et al., 2015). Jordan was one of the first destinations for Syrian refugees, who crossed the border

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to escape the indiscriminate rocket attacks. Some settled near the border, hoping to return home soon. Others travelled onwards in search of an affordable place to stay. While many refugees had hoped to return home quickly, returning became a far-away goal due to the enduring crisis in Syria. In October 2023, UNHCR estimated that there were 653,292 registered Syrians in Jordan, 82% of whom were living outside refugee camps (UNHCR, 2023).

The unprecedented waves of displacement resulting from the Syrian conflict have given rise to complex and multi-faceted challenges that extend far beyond the physical boundaries of refugee camps. Amid these profound changes, digital technologies have emerged as dynamic agents of transformation. According to a UNHCR report (2016) on refugee connectivity, mobile and internet technologies are transforming refugees' lives. Online connectivity has become a fundamental requirement for Syrian refugees residing in Jordan, as it enables them to stay connected with loved ones across the globe and remain updated on the prevailing political landscape in Syria. In a world where the internet, smartphones, and social media have become omnipresent, these have also become essential tools that refugees employ to redefine and reshape the dynamics of their intimate relationships and family structures. This paper scrutinizes the diverse ways in which digital technologies are woven into the fabric of rural Syrian refugee communities' experiences in Jordan. In the diaspora, being exposed to such media necessitates acquiring skills to effectively manage and navigate the information accessible via online platforms.

However, technology is "a double-edge sword ... it has negative and positive sides," as stated by the woman quoted above. She was one of the participants in a research

project in which the main goal was to investigate the relationship between early marriages and sexual and reproductive health issues. Early marriage among Syrians in Jordan is on the rise, and national and international organizations emphasize the fact that many girls are forced to marry (Higher Population Council, 2018; Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). Social media and the internet play an important role in the aspirations of adolescent girls to get married. These girls have access to mobile phones, watch films and video clips about romantic relationships, follow people on Instagram, are active on Facebook and make friends all over the world, and use Snapchat and other apps.

During interviews and group talks with Syrian refugee women who had married before age 18, the importance of the internet and social media came up regularly. Recently married women shared their own experiences and those of their peers, whereas women who had been married longer often complained about their teenage children's "excessive use" of the internet. We found that new digital technologies are a source of information and knowledge, mostly offering opportunities for young people to get in touch with others virtually without the interference of their parents—thereby sometimes providing a platform to meet potential partners. The availability of mobile phones and easy access to social media also impact existing relationships, particularly affecting marriage and divorce.

These findings are in line with those of other studies on gender, intimate relationships, and digital technologies (see, e.g., Archambault, 2013; Doron, 2012; Huang, 2018; Kraemer, 2017). We argue that the impact of digital technologies on intimate relationships is particularly strong in contexts of forced migration, which are often characterized by the loss of (extended) family ties

and the desire to establish new relationships and families (see, e.g., Greene, 2019; Twigt, 2018; Wilding, 2006; Witteborn, 2018). In this paper, we argue that young Syrian refugee women in Jordan use the internet as a private space where emotions and practices regarding intimate and marital life are initiated and expressed. We show how our interlocutors actively engage with these new technologies to improve their livelihoods and how technology structures gendered discourses and practices in the context of displacement. We engage particularly with the concept of “imagined affordance” (Nagy & Neff, 2015), which refers in brief to the imagined possibilities of technology. Our material demonstrates that imagined affordance illuminates the extended possibilities as well as dangers of marriage and divorce for displaced women. Yet as the empirical examples show, imagined affordance remains a gendered experience, often exacerbating the control of women’s intimate lives by men.

## METHODOLOGY

The research project on which this paper is based ran from October 2017 to March 2020. Qualitative research, including in-depth interviews and group talks inspired by participatory action research (PAR) methods, was employed to explore perspectives, experiences, and strategies of Syrian refugee youth in Jordan, focusing on their sexual and reproductive health and rights and the impact of these on marriage. PAR is a research methodology that involves active collaboration between researchers and the individuals or communities being studied (McIntyre, 2007, Van Raemdonck, 2020). In our case, we adapted the methodology of PAR to fit our project, as the topic was predetermined prior to meeting Syrian women in the respective field sites (Van Raemdonck, 2020, Van Raemdonck & de Regt, 2020).

However, the project and its thematic focus (early marriage and its relationship with sexual and reproductive health issues) were developed in collaboration with two practitioner organizations: Caritas Jordan, a large international NGO working in eight centres across the country, and Ahel Al-Jabal, a Jordanian NGO working in Mafraq. Staff members from these two NGOs were closely involved from the very beginning; they facilitated the research and were sometimes also involved directly as researchers. Data were collected in three areas in northern Jordan: in Zarqa, in collaboration with Caritas Jordan; in Mafraq, in collaboration with Ahel Al-Jabal; and in Irbid, where the team did not collaborate with an NGO.

This paper is based on the data collected in Irbid. The research team in Irbid was led by the first author, who is a senior Jordanian researcher;<sup>1</sup> a Syrian refugee woman, who is the third author of this paper; and five research assistants.<sup>2</sup> The team held in-depth interviews with a total of 75 unmarried women, early married women, and divorced women who married at an early age. In addition, over the span of one year, a sequence of 12 PAR group talks were held involving eight married Syrian women. These talks were conducted by the first author, one of the research assistants, and the third author, in whose house the meetings took place. The second author was the principal investigator of the project; she attended one of the group talks and was involved in data analysis and write-up. During the initial phase of fieldwork, from January to July 2018, a prominent theme around the

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<sup>1</sup>The senior researcher possesses a decade-long research tenure, characterized by extensive engagement with Syrian refugees within the Jordanian context. This prolonged involvement has fostered a profound and enduring connection between the researcher and the Syrian refugee community.

<sup>2</sup>The research assistants were five post-graduate students from the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology at Yarmouk University. All of them received training on conducting and analyzing in-depth interviews.

internet's role in the context of marriage and divorce emerged. Consequently, the decision was made to facilitate a series of four specialized group discussions dedicated to in-depth exploration of this specific topic. The data collected during these group talks are central to this paper.

The women who participated in the group talks came from low-income backgrounds, ranging in age from 19 to 30. The majority were from Deraa province, a region in the south of Syria that borders Jordan.<sup>3</sup> All participants had finished primary school, but none had received vocational training or obtained a post-secondary school degree. Our approach to PAR group talks aimed to facilitate a platform of self-reflection for these women to not only share their unique stories but also freely articulate their thoughts. To foster a dynamic and engaging dialogue, we started our conversation with open-ended questions, which encouraged the women to raise further topics for discussion. At the outset, participants showed a degree of hesitancy to openly discussing sensitive and personal issues. An older woman aged 49 was invited to participate in the PAR group talks to encourage the younger women to share their voices and to freely express themselves. As the interactions progressed, the sense of willingness to share more significant life experiences became mutual between researchers and participants. Each meeting lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. These meetings were audio-recorded, anonymized, and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained verbally because signed consent forms were problematic due to the women's low level of education and their fear of putting their signature on paper; the women's names are therefore anonymized.

To address potential biases stemming from the positionality and identity of individuals involved in data collection, we implemented rigorous training for interviewers (research assistants and senior researchers) on cultural sensitivity, neutrality, and the importance of maintaining a non-judgemental stance. We also maintained a continuous feedback loop among the research team to address any challenges or biases that arose during data collection. Additionally, we made efforts to build rapport and trust with participants to encourage open and honest dialogue.

The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic. The subsequent analysis involved translating the interview data into English at the end of each interview; this was done by the first author, who is a native speaker of Arabic and fluent in English. While acknowledging the risk of meaning loss and dilution during translation, efforts have been made to safeguard the reliability of the translated findings.

In the next sections, we will start by exploring the changes in gender and marital norms post-displacement. We then investigate the connection between digital technologies, gender dynamics, and forced migration, underscoring their importance for Syrian refugee women from rural backgrounds. Our discussion extends to the influence of digital technologies, particularly mobile phones, on online dating, marriage practices, and divorce.

## **GENDER AND MARITAL NORMS BEFORE AND AFTER DISPLACEMENT**

The women who took part in our study mostly came from rural families in Deraa. Gender and marital norms in these families have often been characterized by a gendered division of labour and power dynamics within marriage. These norms prescribe specific roles and responsibilities for hus-

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<sup>3</sup>Deraa is the town where the Syrian uprisings started in 2011, and it was heavily attacked by the Syrian army, resulting in large numbers of people fleeing the town and district.

bands and wives based on gender stereotypes. For example, men have often been expected to be the primary breadwinners and decision-makers, while women have been assigned domestic and caregiver duties. Syrian women also took part in some farming activities. Pre-displacement, marriages were seen as a collective aspiration, and the processes around it were highly gendered, with parents having full rights to search for and find potential brides for their sons (Zbeidy, 2020). They would normally involve a “matchmaker” (khtabeh) when their son had turned 18. This matchmaker would select girls based on the desired characteristics of the bride-to-be, such as her character and physical appearance. While the average age for men to marry was 20 years old, many women we interviewed shared that their mothers had married at the age of 14. After displacement, marriage practices have taken on different forms, mainly due to the dispersal of families and friends. The social networks of families have weakened or are no longer available at all, and this has affected marriage options. Although humanitarian organizations emphasize the increased prevalence of early marriages and their harmful aspects, Zbeidy (2020) argues that (early) marriages are an important and desirable step for a better future because other futures are limited. Syrian refugees’ access to education and employment is limited, and marriage formation is one of the few things they have control over. Moreover, Van Raemdonck (2021) shows that (early) marriages should also be seen as “acts of home-making in a social context that discourages refugees from settling and taking root” (p. 175). While most research emphasizes economic relief as a reason why parents marry off their children at a young age, Van Raemdonck points to the “desire for normality” in protracted displacement.

Al Akash & Chalmiers (2021) discuss several other reasons why marriages are important for refugees, such as preventing adolescents’ engagement in premarital sex and relieving girls from the pressure of protecting and maintaining the family reputation. Other scholars indicate that early marriage can be perceived positively or considered a logical choice in specific contexts, particularly when local alternatives are limited (Stark, 2018). In addition, marriage can serve as a significant source of social support in displacement. It provides emotional, instrumental, and informational support that aids individuals in coping with the challenges of displacement. During our group talks, the social importance of marriage was emphasized, as well as its multi-faceted nature. Before displacement, most married couples lived with the husband’s family while staying close to the wife’s family, who in many cases lived in the same village. Marital problems were solved through elderly family members’ collective interference with the aim of keeping the couple together. The presence of a social network, and in particular a family network, was extremely important in keeping marriages intact. These social networks broke down after displacement, along with family protection and support mechanisms. As a result, most Syrian women who participated in the research affirmed that divorce became easier and divorce rates have increased.

### **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES, GENDER, AND FORCED MIGRATION**

The various ways in which digital technologies shape social relations have received ample attention (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Horst & Miller, 2020; Miller & Slater, 2020). Studies on gender and digital technologies have shown that mobile phones can reinforce gender norms, but they can also enable social practices that challenge these norms

(Archambault, 2013; Doron, 2012; Huang, 2018; Wallis, 2011). Mobile phones facilitate communication with family and friends, as well as with people one may not yet know. Kraemer (2017) argues that instead of asking whether mobile phones positively or negatively affect gender relations, more attention should be paid to materiality and social change. In Port Vila, Republic of Vanuatu, young people are increasingly choosing their own partners and “establishing new ways of ‘urban dating’, cohabiting, and informal marriage” (Kraemer, 2017, p. 51). Mobile phones have also bolstered suspicion and a lack of trust: they are visible and audible, and incoming messages and phone calls can be questioned by others, but using silent mode is also seen as suspicious. Moreover, mobile phones store evidence in the form of text messages and pictures, which often plays a role in the formation and break-up of relationships. Kraemer found no gender differences in the use of mobile phones and even argues that women were able to “extend their sociality in time and space, and in doing so were defying patriarchal restrictions” (p. 52).

Relatively few studies have addressed the gendered dimensions of refugee women’s use of mobile phones and social media (Greene, 2019; Wilding, 2006; Witteborn, 2018). Greene (2019) studied refugee women’s digital practices while they waited in camps in Greece. She explains the lack of research on refugee women’s mobile phone use with reference to the fact that men are still seen as those who leave their places of origin and women as those who stay behind. In Greene’s study, women demonstrated that mobile phones played significant roles in enabling agency, particularly in relation to emotions and affect. Their use of mobile phones in the camps served three key purposes. First, they chose to ignore mainstream

news, finding it too distressing, and instead relied on news sent to them by friends and family, which Greene interprets as a self-care tactic. Second, they used mobile phones to mediate family practices, fostering a sense of hope for the future. Last, they engaged in photography as a creative outlet, particularly capturing images of nature.

Digital technologies are changing the lives of refugees in different ways; for example, they facilitate transnational and local networks and allow refugees to access relevant information and services in their new places (for an overview, see Alencar, 2020). The gendered dimensions of refugees’ internet connectivity have been studied as well, but not much attention has been paid to the role of mobile phones in marriage and divorce practices in the context of forced migration in the Middle East and North Africa. How are mobile phones and new digital technologies affecting the lives of rural Syrian refugee women in Jordan, especially their intimate relationships? In our research, women regularly referred to the positive and negative consequences of digital technologies, explaining how they could build and break (marital) relationships. Among our informants, these technologies appeared to be very important for accessing information on sexual and reproductive issues and therefore are leading to what is often called a digital revolution. This exploration of the transformation of gender and marital norms pre- and post-displacement, alongside an analysis of the interplay among digital technologies, gender dynamics, and forced migration, presents an opportunity for a multi-faceted contribution to existing literature. The detailed insights of how women navigate societal expectations, strategically adhering to or diverging from gender norms, adds a layer of complexity to the discourse. Furthermore, examining the pivotal role of

digital technologies, notably mobile phones, in the lives of Syrian refugee women, both in rural and displaced contexts, contributes a contextual lens to the broader discussions about technology and migration.

Nagy & Neff (2015) coined the concept of imagined affordance, which underscores the transformative impact of digital technologies on social perceptions. Through the lens of a mobile phone, individuals conceptualize a world of possibilities, challenging conventional notions of spatial limitations in interpersonal relationships. The affordances imagined in this context are not merely about the technical capabilities of the device but involve the construction of a virtual landscape where the boundaries of physical proximity are redefined and the potential for connection becomes boundless. This concept enables us to understand not only how individuals actively harness technology to improve their livelihoods but also how technology shapes and influences gendered discourse and practices surrounding the complex domains of marriage and divorce. Our material demonstrates particularly how divorce becomes much easier imagined and possible, especially for women, due to technology.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVES

In prewar Syria, particularly in rural areas where many of the refugees in northern Jordan originate from, the use of internet and new technologies was limited. Freedom of speech was highly restricted, and the internet and other digital technologies were controlled and regulated by the state (Gorczeski, 2019). The internet was not a very widespread means of communication in Syria. Rural areas and villages faced challenges due to weak network coverage and

inadequate infrastructure for telecommunication services. Additionally, the government exerted control over the telecommunications sector, imposing restrictions on the number of licences granted to service providers. These factors resulted in limited access to reliable and widespread telecommunications services, particularly in rural communities. In addition, "access to social media applications, such as Facebook and YouTube, was officially banned" (Mourtada & Salem, 2011, p. 518). According to the Arab Social Media Report, the percentage of Syrians who had digital access in December 2010 was 28%, relatively little of the population in comparison with neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan (Mourtada & Salem, 2011). The internet and internet cafés were nonetheless becoming more popular in larger cities like Damascus and Aleppo. In our group talks, the women explained that when they left the country, the vast majority of Syrians from Deraa province did not yet have smartphones and mostly used basic mobile phones during their journeys. While both smartphones and basic mobile phones allow users to make phone calls and send text messages, smartphones offer additional communication options such as video calls and multimedia sharing. In terms of internet connectivity, smartphones provide high-speed internet connectivity via Wi-Fi and cellular data networks, allowing users to browse the internet and easy access to social media. Post-displacement, smartphones have increasingly become an integral part of Syrians' everyday life. Om Qais, a 25-year-old woman who came to Jordan in 2012, said,

Back in Syria, I had an old-fashioned cellphone. I used it only to answer and make phone calls. I didn't know about the internet or social media. After settling and familiarizing myself with life in Jordan, I bought a new smartphone and learned how to deal with social media apps. For me, it was necessary to have a smartphone to know what is

happening in Syria and to stay in touch with my parents.

While smartphones were originally expensive, prices dropped rapidly and a large variety of different types of phones became available. Like other group of refugees, Syrian refugees in Jordan are not a homogeneous group, and their digital practices and experiences are thus also not all the same. Demographic origins, digital literacy, ideological views, and multimedia affordance all shape the use of smartphones and the internet. Gender affects the use of digital technologies, with women having less access to mobile devices and the internet than men, as do other identity markers such as age and social class. Young Syrian women whom we met used mobile phones much more than older women (over 50 years of age), and social class affected the number and types of the devices used. Older women from lower social classes had less advanced devices and less access to the internet. They also used their phones less frequently than younger women and men.

Although not all the Syrian refugee women we met owned smartphones, most had access to at least one device. Sometimes people shared a phone with other members of their household. Bayan, 20 years old, came to Jordan in 2013. Her home in Deraa was hit by a missile rocket and demolished. She fled to Jordan with a small bag of essentials. Because the war had destroyed all her photo albums, Bayan started using her husband's smartphone to take pictures of her new life and surroundings in Jordan. She explained that she wanted to create new memories. For Bayan, the mobile phone functioned as a "repository of memories" (Kraemer, 2017). Its materiality is thus significant, in line with Kraemer's (2017) argument that not only is the affective affordance of mobile phones related to the possibilities of connecting with

others, but the phone itself as a material object is important because it can store images and messages. For refugees who have lost their homes and belongings, personal pictures of the past are important, but similarly so are mobile phones, which create new memories. These pictures can also be seen as part of the process of homemaking away from home, as described by our informants.

Despite the various challenges associated with mobile phones, such as the costs of wireless internet, data packages, and security concerns, our research participants regarded smartphones as essential and not a luxury or add-on device: it was the only way to communicate with the outer world. Om Ammar, a 46-year-old woman who lived in Ramtha since 2013, stated,

Cellphones are more important than food. If you have a cellphone then you can have food, because the aid agencies and UNHCR send messages to Syrians about any available aid and food coupons via WhatsApp or messages. If you don't have a cellphone, then you don't know where and when to get financial aid. In addition, through my mobile phone I track my husband and children when they are out; I contact my relatives in Syria; I also get instant entertainment when I am bored.

Om Ammar mentioned three important functions of mobile phones: they directly enable access to food, they facilitate contact with family members close by and far away, and they are a source of entertainment. Technology also offers the opportunity to socially interact with one another and provide social and psychological support. Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, YouTube, Imo, Viber, and other social media platforms are used to obtain information and stay in touch with family members and friends. The women we interviewed used these apps not only for entertainment but also for educational purposes, which has not been mentioned often in the literature on refugee women's use of digital technologies. Several women



told us that they access Wikipedia to get knowledge on specific subjects and YouTube to watch cooking programs, religious series, and instructive videos on various issues. Hanan, a 23-year-old woman, said that the internet could be beneficial depending on what it is used for, because “technology is a huge world that helps to develop and modernize life.” Hanan used the internet to educate herself about sexual health:

I use the internet to search for new educational methods. I normally do not search, but if I pass through something important for me, I open it and watch it on YouTube. There is a very famous Egyptian doctor called Heba Qutb, she talks about sexual relations between couples, and our society needs sexual orientation.

Hanan also shared with us that she had once asked her son to listen to an online program about masturbation because his friends had told him that it is *harām* (religiously prohibited) and could be harmful to someone’s sexual health as it might cause infertility. Fairuz, 25 years old, told us that she was embarrassed to ask her mother about sexuality and that she therefore used YouTube to educate herself. Talking about one’s sexual life was considered taboo by our interviewees, and mothers were embarrassed to discuss it with their daughters before marriage. During the group talks, we heard that the internet was the main source to obtain information about sexuality for Syrian girls who are about to marry. When phones are shared or when people live together in small places, it is more difficult for users to surf the internet freely. In other contexts such as Bangladesh (Sibona, 2021), women have been very hesitant about using phones to access information that might be considered inappropriate or imply an interest in sexual issues, because there is a risk of being judged. In our group talks, this did not come up, but women mentioned that their

phone use was restricted when they were sharing the phone with others.

Digital technologies have emerged as a valuable resource for Syrian women in displacement, enabling them to maintain connections with their loved ones and access information that was once inaccessible. While previous studies have highlighted the significance of digital technologies in sexual education for young people, our findings show that Syrian refugee youth, particularly girls, have partially benefited from living and growing up in the diaspora. This environment grants them access to digital information that was previously unavailable to them in Syria.

## ONLINE DATING AND MARRIAGE PRACTICES

Prior to the conflict in Syria, matrimonial unions were typically arranged through parental arrangements, informal social networks, and the involvement of matchmakers, as explained above. Nowadays, Syrian men and women turn increasingly to social media and modern technologies as a means of facilitating marriage arrangements. Many online groups and digital matchmakers exist to mediate marriage between Syrian refugees in different parts of the world. Online, Syrians date, propose marriage, and even perform marriage ceremonies. However, because of the taboo on premarital relationships, it was not easy during the group talks to discuss personal experiences with online dating and marriage. Only one woman shared her own experiences:

I had an online relationship, and we are married now. These relationships are very secretive in nature due to the religious and social restrictions. It is not easy for a girl to say frankly that she is dating someone online; the punishment for having an online affair is the same as offline.

Online dating has played a pivotal role in eliminating geographical barriers, enabling individuals to connect with others from within or outside of their own social circles. For women, online interactions reduce the social stigma associated with meeting unfamiliar men in person, allowing for a better understanding of potential partners before formalizing a marriage. Online platforms provide a secretive means of direct communication, bypassing family interference and restrictive customs. With more options online, both women and men must exercise independent judgement in making choices. Moreover, it offers unmarried individuals the chance to interact before engagement, which was not possible in the rural communities they came from.

As mentioned, previously family members would be involved in the selection of marriage partners, assisted by a matchmaker, but this "safety net" is absent online. Today, marriage ceremonies can also be done online; sometimes marriages even take place between individuals who live in different continents. Alia, a young woman of 21 years, told us:

My sister-in-law met someone on Facebook in America. She is here [in Jordan]. They met somewhere and got married. Now he is preparing papers for family reunification. These cases are quite prevalent.

These stories of people who met online while living in different parts of the world are examples of imagined affordance (Nagy & Neff, 2015), in which digital technologies facilitate the idea that "anything is possible with a mobile phone" (p. 2). Online romances and marriage proposals in cyberspace are feeding the imaginations of refugee women and create hope for a better future elsewhere (Twigt, 2018). The online experiences of Syrian women we met starkly contrast with their lived realities, in which

their mobility is very limited. Being stuck as refugees in a country where they have no citizenship rights, and where female refugees have less mobility than refugee men, therefore makes real-life union with their future husbands far from easy. The prospect of forging romantic bonds and receiving marriage proposals in cyberspace introduces a dimension of hope, suggesting the possibility of a more promising and secure future beyond the confines of displacement.

While older women expressed reservations about online interactions with men, younger and unmarried women perceived it as a convenient and efficient means to find a partner. They viewed online platforms as accessible and effective tools to connect with potential suitors and pursue their romantic aspirations. Unmarried Syrian women might date someone secretly online without their parents' permission. Dating—online dating in particular—is not socially accepted and therefore takes place in secret. Online dating consists mostly of (video) chatting. Exchanging pictures is not common as pictures could be shared with others and is therefore too risky, especially for women. Maryam, a 22-year-old woman, had a negative experience online; she trusted the man she was dating online and aspired to a genuine relationship with him that would lead to marriage. They exchanged intimate photos; the man eventually asked her to go out on a date and threatened to share the pictures with her father if she refused.

In addition, women should not initiate online contact as this is seen as shameful and makes men suspicious because they are afraid that women who take the initiative could also initiate contact with other men when they are married. So, on the one hand, digital technologies are multiplying opportunities for women to meet possible future

husbands, but on the other hand, online dating practices are still highly gendered.

Smartphones and the internet have resulted in new forms of dating among refugees, and many of the young women in our group talks mentioned that online dating is becoming a trend. They evaluated positively the fact that it is possible for unmarried women to meet potential partners online and communicate with them before getting married. Marrying without the approval of their parents or legal guardians is hardly possible. Despite the increasing popularity of online dating and possible marriage proposals, many parents are against it. Fatima, a 49-year-old Syrian woman who participated in our group talks, has three sons and a daughter, and she strongly opposed her children's "excessive" use of the internet, as she described it. In her view, online relationships are deceptive, and the "right match" cannot be found online. Interestingly, she did not refer to the fact that parents have no say in their children's marriages anymore, but rather emphasized that in many cases, "the reality is different from what girls see online, and disappointment and deception are waiting around the corner." Fatima's statement is another example of the imagined affordance of digital technologies: men and women who are using the internet get in touch with potential dating and marriage partners and may imagine a future that does not live up to their expectations. Fatima was therefore wary of the internet and discouraged her children against spending too much time online, fearing her daughter's potential online relationships.

Syrian women who use digital technologies to date potential marriage partners have to deploy them cautiously because their online behaviour can quickly be considered 'ayb (shameful) and harām (religiously prohibited). Male family members and relatives

therefore sometimes restrict their wives', daughters', or sisters' digital activities. For example, they prohibit the use of pictures that reveal their identities because they might be considered harām. Women, on the other hand, may at times choose to conform to gender norms as a means of expressing or striving to embody specific facets of moral character that resonate with their individual beliefs and values (Mahmood, 2005). Such choices often embody a subtle balance between personal beliefs and values and the broader cultural context. For women, conforming to gender norms can be a strategic means of aligning personal aspirations with societal expectations. While putting profile pictures on social media is condemned by some people because they are publicly visible, watching YouTube videos, accessing sexuality information, and chatting are private and can be done in secret. Women use the "chat history delete feature" when they feel their online activities are being monitored.

Digital technologies and online dating platforms are thus reshaping social and marital interactions during displacement. However, while young women can benefit from these opportunities, they still rely on legal guardians for marriage. In addition, they must navigate online spaces carefully to safeguard their reputation in their social circles. In the next section we focus on the ways in which digital technologies have an impact on divorce.

## HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AFFECT DIVORCE

Divorce cases among Syrians were rather exceptional prior to displacement. However, there are indications that divorce rates have increased following displacement (Tobin et al., 2021). Unfortunately, reliable statistics about Syrians' divorces are not available

in Jordan. During our research we found that divorce seems to be easier and more acceptable for the new generation who married in Jordan, whereas the older generation of Syrian women regard divorce as a catastrophe for the family. Amina, aged 24, stated that divorce rates among Syrians are very high due to the high rates of marriages: "What comes easy goes easy." She explained that marriages are often "easily" arranged, without men paying a proper dowry and preparing a house for the new couple to live in—marriages that are easily arranged are also easily dissolved. Participants confirmed that the psychological pressure caused by war, asylum, economic hardship, the absence of parents, relatives and friends, and loneliness all caused numerous marital problems and conflicts.

The married women in our study relied heavily on their husbands for financial support, making the idea of divorce extremely frightening and despair-inducing. Despite acknowledging marital issues, the participants unanimously regarded divorce as an unthinkable choice. They believed it would have profoundly negative repercussions for both women and children, necessitating its prevention. The most important causes of problems between spouses that they mentioned were lack of understanding (*tafāhum*) between marriage partners (*Zbeidy, 2020*), interference from the husband's family, and an authoritarian mother-in-law. While these problems could also happen in Syria, living in displacement had heightened the tensions. In addition, high levels of unemployment among Syrian men, post-traumatic disorders, and the protracted situation that leads to uncertainty about one's own future all impacted marital relations. As *Chalmiers (2021)* notes, the limitations imposed by material scarcity not only shape one's current lived experiences but also constrict previously

expansive realms of future potentiality now confined by the precarious circumstances of the present moment. Not surprisingly, new digital technologies were mentioned by most research participants as factors affecting marital relationships. For example, Heba, a 24-year-old woman, said,

Wrong use of the internet causes betrayals and divorce because everyone uses it wrongly. Facebook has been a risk for us, and many people have been abused because of it. Since mobiles started spreading, we get together less and do all our communication through the net. Internet has caused a rise in the divorce rates because women and men abuse freedoms and use the internet excessively instead.

If a man suspects something about his wife's online activity, troubles may arise. Amani, a 22-year-old woman, told us:

Once a guy sent me a [friendship] request while the phone was with my husband. I told my husband I didn't know the guy, but he didn't believe me, and he said that I knew him and that we talked to each other and then a lot of problems started.

Not only are mobile phones a way of connecting and expanding one's social network, but they may also contribute to suspicion and lack of trust between married couples. Many Syrian women said they would prefer their husbands to marry a second wife rather than divorce them. Divorced women lack the protection of the family, are stigmatized, and sometimes have to provide for themselves. This is why some women are willing to accept "part-time husbands" who share their lives with other women or who spend most of their time online. Aya, a 24-year-old Syrian woman, said,

As for our society, the percentage of divorces has increased because of the internet. My husband spends a lot of time on the internet, and I can't even talk to him because he is always busy with Facebook, and maybe it is even better like this, he doesn't make problems with me.

Many women shared similar complaints about their husband's excessive phone use

and internet activities. It made them feel neglected: "My husband is on Messenger all the time; I can hardly exchange two words with him." Others, however, were happy that their husbands were quiet and not bothering them: "My husband is occupied with Facebook and WhatsApp, which is good, then he stops nagging at us." Thus, in addition to being a reason for conflict and suspicion that could lead to divorce, mobile phones can also change the nature of marital relationships.

## CONCLUSION

To understand online marriage and divorce among rural Syrian refugees in northern Jordan, it is essential to consider the cultural, social, and technological contexts in which online marriage and divorce occur. The experiences and perceptions of individuals in displacement can vary widely and are influenced by factors such as gender, age, educational background, and access to technology. Cultural norms, legal frameworks, and social support systems also shape the outcomes and implications of online marriage and divorce among refugees. The internet, smartphones, and social media have significantly transformed the lives of displaced Syrians, particularly rural women and men. Online activities now consume a significant portion of their daily routines, especially for those without employment or a local social network. Digital technologies have become a substitute for physical social networks, including family and friends, playing a crucial role in dating, marriage, and establishing new relationships. Displacement often results in the loss of extended family connections, making it challenging to find suitable marriage partners. Online dating practices have expanded customary matchmaking methods, enabling alternative perspectives on marriage and gender roles within families.

Digital technologies are "a double-edged sword" in the words of one of our research participants. They have advantages and disadvantages, as our research findings show. Parents frequently express concerns about their children's internet usage and make efforts to curtail what they perceive as "excessive use." In our research, we found that older women were particularly worried that their daughters might encounter deceitful individuals online. Surprisingly, parents themselves often fall into the trap of excessive mobile phone use, which can have negative consequences for their own marital relationships.

In addition to mental problems this behaviour might cause, familial distress is also widespread. Although the virtual world is an open space, it is also a private space for many people, and those who spend much time on their phones are suspected of having online affairs. This suspicion might trigger feelings of insecurity, resentment, and jealousy for both men and women, which can lead to marital problems and sometimes divorce. Smartphones enable the transgression of gender norms, particularly those that control female sexuality. Women who use social media have to strategically navigate social and cultural boundaries with regard to gender, mobility, and modesty, and do intense boundary-making work (Doron, 2012, p. 429).

Furthermore, digital technologies have emerged as alternative channels to access information regarding sexual and reproductive issues. Unmarried and married women alike leverage mobile phones to seek answers to questions they might hesitate to ask openly. They rely on YouTube channels addressing sexuality, thereby gaining access to information that was previously inaccessible to them. New digital technologies also offer young Syrian refugees opportunities to connect with one another virtually, free from

parental interference, and provide a platform to meet potential marriage partners. Further research is warranted to deepen our understanding of the dynamics, implications, and long-term consequences of online marriage and divorce among refugees. Exploring the intersection of online relationships with broader socio-cultural contexts can inform the development of policies, interventions, and support systems that promote healthy and sustainable relationships while addressing the unique challenges faced by refugees in the digital age. The use of technology was particularly insightful in regard to the changing trends of divorce among displaced Syrians. Our material demonstrates that imagined affordance illuminates the extended possibilities as well as dangers of divorce for displaced women. Yet as the empirical examples show, imagined affordance remains a gendered experience, often exacerbating the control of women's intimate lives by men.

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