

# Double Immobility: Syrian Refugee Women Navigating the Voluntary and Forced Marriage Binary in Egypt

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## Abstract

Research on why women, especially racialized women, stay in undesirable relationships is scarce and often misses how intersecting inequalities affect their decisions and the wider range of consent and coercion. Syrian refugee women in Egypt, grappling with not just unwanted marriages but also displacement and uprooting are a case in point. Their limited cultural, social, and legal mobility complicates their decision-making and limits their options. I describe this compounded precarity as "double immobility": immobility within the marriage and immobility within the country. A secondary displacement where this time they become "displaced in place" (Lubkemann, 2008). Drawing on qualitative interviews with Syrian refugee women in Egypt in 2017, I employ an intersectional lens to highlight the social, legal, and migratory locations of displaced women that exacerbate their predicament, prompting a re-evaluation of the binary views of force/voluntary and coercion/consent in discussions about entering, remaining, and exiting marriage. The paper offers a novel framework for understanding the intersection of gendered displacement and marital dynamics and contributes to the broader discussion within the sociology of gender, displacement, and marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage, displacement, immobility, forced marriage, Syria, Egypt

## INTRODUCTION

Debates surrounding displacement and marriage regularly engage with issues of autonomy, agency, and consent, yet they are frequently constrained by entrenched assumptions that create a false dichotomy between the Western ideal of 'marriage for love' and non-Western marriage customs (Gill and Anthias, 2011). These assumptions overlook the complex interplay of pressures, sacrifices, and benefits that individuals navigate, complicating the delineation between consent and coercion in these marital arrangements (Bredall, 2011). Additionally, these nuanced dynamics are often influenced by economic hardships or the necessity to sustain transnational networks essential for family survival, further enriching the discourse with layers of socio-economic and cultural factors (Chantler et al., 2009; Hester et al., 2008; Sharmani, 2010).

Research exploring why women, particularly racialized and those from the global south, remain in such relationships remains scarce. For example, some studies have investigated the role of cost-benefit analysis in the decision-making processes of both racialized and non-racialized women facing abuse (Heron et al., 2022; Bell & Naugle, 2005). However, these studies often overlook the influence of intersecting inequalities and interlocking privileges and oppressions on such analyses and the broader spectrum of consent and coercion. Thus, it is crucial to consider how various factors intersect to shape women's choices, including their socioeconomic status, cultural norms, experiences of racism, the societal expectation of heterosexuality, and the gendered nature of legal and immigration policies (Gill and Anitha, 2011). Syrian refugee women navigating not only an undesirable marriage but also displacement and uprooting in a foreign country are a case in point. They lack cultural, social, and legal maneuverability, further complicating their decision-making processes, exacerbating their risks, and constraining their options.

While the Syrian outflow extends to many neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Fajry 2012) each context carries its unique dynamics. During my fieldwork in Egypt in 2017, I interviewed Syrian Sunni refugee women marrying Egyptian men upon their arrival in Egypt, a phenomenon that sparked controversy among various advocacy groups and social media platforms (Bayoumi, 2013; Fajry, 2012; Hassan, 2015) raising concerns about exploitation of helpless refugee women. In discussing the same case, I argued elsewhere (Taha 2020; Taha 2021), that many of these women strategically employed marriage as a means of agency where they identified opportunities for mutual benefit with their spouses, such as (re)building social capital and obtaining legal status for migration while offering their husbands a “desirable” wife in return. This approach allowed them to craft their own pathways for resettlement within a failing refugee regime. In this paper, however, I focus on some of the undesirable effects of such agentive choice where refugee women who initially entered such unions voluntarily and after weighing the risks and benefits of leaving a failing relationship wound up being “stuck” on more than one front leading to what I refer to as “double immobility”, immobility within the marriage and immobility within the country—a social, emotional, legal and geographical immobility. They become "displaced in place," as Lubkemann (2008) describes, experiencing the effects of displacement through drastic changes in their living conditions and social status, even without physically moving from their location.

Intersectionality is a critical feminist framework developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), which emphasizes that people have multiple social identities – e.g., race, gender, class, sexuality and in this case more importantly migration status and social capital, that intersect and interact to shape their experiences of privilege and oppression. Employing intersectional analysis, I position "double immobility" as a concept that reveals the multiple axes of identity and social structures

shaping women's experiences with gender, forced displacement, and marriage. It represents a condition where individuals, especially women, face simultaneous constraints on their mobility, both geographically and socially, within marriage and the host country. Mobility here encompasses not only physical movement but also emotional and social freedom, including the ability to migrate, repatriate, and leave both the marriage and the country.

I argue that definitions focusing on force and coercion at the beginning of the marriage overlook those forced to remain in one (Samad and Eade 2002; Gill and Anitha 2011). Furthermore, research suggests that many men trap women in abusive relationships using different strategies involving children, financial control, immigration status, and emotional manipulation (Chantler et al. 2009; Gill and Anitha 2011). While many women struggle to leave abusive relationships, forced displacement exacerbates such experiences and adds more layers to such coercion. Although the fieldwork took place in 2017, nearly seven years before writing this paper, women's experiences with gender in displacement remain highly relevant. By centering how some marginalized and displaced women weigh their options to decide on remaining in abusive relationships, this case sheds light on two areas that enhance studies on gender, displacement, and the sociology of marriage: First, how displaced women exercise agency when faced with limited options through identifying mutual benefit with the spouse by leveraging some aspects of their social location (e.g., their desirable ethnicity). Second, how it also shows the further precarity that such women face compared to other displaced people but also compared to other women who are stuck in an abusive relationship.

I thus ask: What are the unique challenges and forms of coercion faced by displaced women who remain in abusive relationships, and how can this expand our understanding of the forced/voluntary or coercion/consent spectrum in marriage? How do some displaced women weigh

their costs and benefits when deciding on remaining in an undesirable marriage considering their limited options and intersecting inequalities with other groups? In addressing these questions, I also draw attention to cases that highlight the transactional aspects of marriage and the varying degrees of consent and coercion that underlie many similar unions. I start by reviewing existing literature on the convergence of migration and marriage and the role of consent and coercion within them, followed by giving a brief background about the situation of Syrian refugee women in Egypt and outlining the study's methodology. Subsequently, through detailed vignettes, I explore the trajectories of some of my respondents shedding light on the concept of double immobility and underscoring the importance of considering intersectional factors in shaping their experiences.

## MARRIAGE IN DISPLACEMENT: BEYOND THE CULTURE DEFICIT INTERPRETATIONS

Western hegemonic conceptions of conjugal relationships are a point of debate in literature focusing on marriage and displacement questioning the assumption that the nuclear family and love-driven relationships are universal markers of genuine marriage (Gill and Anitha 2011). Kim (2014) for instance illustrates how North Korean women utilize cross-border marriages to sustain their livelihoods in exchange for their sexuality and labor (pp. 559-60). Palriwala and Uberoi (2008) emphasize the diverse cultural interpretations of arranged marriages and marriage transactions, highlighting the danger of equating certain practices necessarily with coercion and victimization. Grabska (2010) further explores the practice of bridewealth<sup>1</sup> among Sudanese refugees, emphasizing its role in preserving social and cultural ties and kinship structures (p. 492).

The spectrum connecting consent and coercion within marriage is multifaceted, encompassing marriages resulting from physical coercion, fear of harm, emotional intimidation and financial pressure, to some might argue, social expectations and social mobility (Anitha and

Gill 2009; Enright 2009; Gangoli et al. 2009; Razack 2004; Siddiqui 2003). Furthermore, existing definitions of forced marriage primarily focus on the choice to marry at the time of entry into the marriage, but women may find themselves at myriad points in a marriage weighing their options and redefining their best interest in remaining or exiting a marriage due to reasons such as ongoing gender surveillance, societal norms against divorce, or as we will see, displacement and their precarious migration status (Samad and Eade 2002; Gill and Anitha 2011). Additionally, the risk of increased violence during or post-separation often compels women to return to their abusers, regardless of their ethnic or religious background, or their migration status. Thus, a holistic understanding of coercion and consent within marriage should encompass force and coercion at the entry, during the marriage, and around the exit points (Hester et al. 2008; Gill and Anitha 2011).

Furthermore, the issue of forced marriage among women in the Global South constitutes a complex dilemma deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts (Gill and Anitha 2011; Razack 2004; Siddiqui 2003). Women facing such marriage practices are often confronted with a choice between enduring oppression silently or aligning with external imperialist agendas justifying a white savior complex (Farahani & Thapar-Björkert 2020) and a self-serving colonial civilizing mission (Ahmed 1992). This conflict has its roots in colonial history, which selectively focused on gender-related norms to save brown women from brown men as Spivak (1988) describes. Although some colonial efforts aligned with the concerns of local women, others contradicted and weakened their autonomy (Gill and Anitha, 2011).

In this vein, many studies discussing the topic of marriage and the Syrian refugee crisis fixate on GBV, child marriage, and forced marriage ( see for instance, El Arab and Sagbakken 2019; Bartels et al. 2018; Al Akash, and Chalmiers 2021). Emerging research, nevertheless, is starting to recognize the centrality of marriage as a coping mechanism and a response to

displacement moving beyond simplistic exploitation narratives (see for instance Taha 2020; Zbeidy 2020; Akyuz and Tursun 2019). For instance, Achillis (2017) argued that the portrayal of Syrian refugees as pure victims of exploitation by “violent men who prey on their vulnerability,” is an oversimplified interpretation of a complex situation that depicts a mixture of solidarity and mutual benefits (monetary benefits/enhance refugee mobility) in the context of a global legal system that promotes the securitization of borders leaving refugees with little to no choice. Similarly, Akyuz and Tursun (2019) show how Syrian refugee women use their agency to navigate gendered experiences and power dynamics in their marriages to Turkish men. These marriages reveal a sense of agency as the women employ strategies to manage their roles, transforming their gender identities amid the complexities of forced migration and cultural integration. Zbeidy (2020) also highlights the centrality of marriage for Syrian refugees' post-displacement futures, shaping marriage practices, meanings and implications. However, Zbeidy notes that many of the interviewees prefer to marry fellow Syrians, driven by a desire to return to a post-war Syria. This preference leaves a gap in understanding the motivations, experiences, and implications for those who choose to marry someone from the host country.

## SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN EGYPT

The phenomenon of Syrian women marrying Egyptian men in Egypt amid displacement and economic hardship reveals a complex interplay of legal, economic, and social factors. Egypt is home to over 5 million refugees and migrants (Karasapan 2016), including 352,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers where Syrians remain the largest group (UNHCR Egypt Factsheet 2023). Though the official number of registered Syrian refugees in Egypt is estimated by the UNHCR at 150,000, the actual number is probably much higher not accounting for unregistered refugees, those arriving on tourist visas or for business (Ayoub 2017; Ayoub and Khallaf 2014).

Syrians have been grappling with economic challenges and political polarization since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011 (ECHO Factsheet, 2018; ILO, 2018). A 2016 Socioeconomic Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Egypt conducted by UNHCR recounted that the majority of Syrian refugees in Egypt face significant socio-economic hardships, with a staggering 93 percent unable to meet family expenses (UNHCR, 2016). More specifically, households headed by women tend to have “much lower levels of employment, partly on account of protection concerns faced by women in public spaces and other cultural barriers” (p. 6).

Despite Egypt being a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the rights of refugees, including the right to work, have been curtailed, exacerbating their economic struggles (Hetaba, McNally, & Habersky, 2020) and arguably leading to the emergence of marriage as an option for some Syrian women trying to navigate displacement (Taha 2020). The experiences of Syrian women in Egypt, nevertheless, vary depending on their socio-economic backgrounds. As conveyed to me by two key informants, Nahla, a journalist, and Maysaa, Director of a refugee support NGO, while those from upper-class backgrounds may have established networks and businesses early on, those from lower socio-economic levels have faced greater challenges but have also integrated more readily into Egyptian society. Marriage has emerged as a significant aspect of this integration, with some Egyptian men seeking Syrian brides through religious institutions and other channels including word of mouth and social media. Syrian women, as Nahla explained, are often perceived as compliant, feminine, and skilled in domestic duties, making them desirable partners. The refugee status of these women further accentuates their perceived vulnerabilities and passivity. It is not surprising thus that media reports and advocacy efforts have highlighted the exploitative nature of these marriages, with Syrian women being portrayed as "easy prey" and the practice condemned as a form of exploitation (Heinrich

Boll, 2013; Natour, 2016). Social media campaigns have emerged to raise awareness and denounce the exploitation of Syrian refugee women in marriage arrangements (Fajry, 2012). The context above frames an exploitative feminist and humanitarian narrative of the apparent problem, which calls for a critical and deeper analysis of how and why this phenomenon came to be and what we can make of it as scholars and advocates.

## METHODOLOGY

In the summer of 2017 and over four months, I conducted thirty-three in-depth interviews with Syrian Muslim refugee women, all residing in the two largest Egyptian provinces: Greater Cairo and Alexandria. Two of the largest governorates also comprise the bulk of Syrian refugees especially in areas such as the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city and the 10<sup>th</sup> of Ramadan city at the skirts of the greater Cairo area. All of the women whose ages ranged from 18-50 were either currently married, were due to marry, or had been married at some point to Egyptian men after 2012. More than half of the sample were previously married and had children. I relied on personal connections, snowball sampling, social media, and a healthy dose of perseverance in getting in touch with key informants to assist me with recruiting my sample. Additionally, some ethnographical observations, leveraging my cultural fluency and close if not congruent life experiences as an Egyptian Muslim woman, wife, and mother, were incorporated to enhance the reader's understanding of the contextual terrain. All identifying information was anonymized and pseudonyms replaced real names. Written or verbal consent was obtained before and throughout the interviews.

I sought to represent all socio-economic levels as well as age groups and marital statuses. Even though it was primarily a convenience sample, in the middle of the fieldwork, I made some adjustments by incorporating elements of purposive sampling by seeking women from the upper-middle and upper classes who had initially been underrepresented. In doing so, I sought to balance

the initial recruitments that mainly were from lower-middle and lower classes by seeking references through social media and acquaintances. Further, since Egypt and the Syrian population in Egypt are both overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims, my sample consisted only of Sunni participants.

In this study, I opted for a translation approach that captures the cultural and contextual aspects of the conversation and, more importantly, the voice of the women respondents. I use two strategies in translating excerpts from the respondents' interviews. First, I do not aim to interpret or explain the text as much as to make "the context of the source visible" (Abdelbaki 2021, p. 12). In many instances, I spend time giving context and backgrounds that could plausibly have produced a certain statement or term by one of the respondents or deconstructing the meanings of some of the packed terms or statements. A second strategy is to "mediate between two contexts through bilingual and bicultural texts" (p. 14).

In the analysis, I sought to identify implicit and explicit cues to explore how the respondents experience this social context, where their sense of subjectivity, agency and responsibility lie, and how gender relations and discursive practices are linked. Notably, in analyzing the participants' accounts, I focus on the life course processes or "stories that illustrate lives as they unfold and change, through planned and unexpected role transitions or turning points" (Bischoping & Gazso 2016, p. 19). In examining these stories, I deploy strategies to uncover how the narrators position themselves and their agentic choices vis-à-vis other individuals in their stories. The strategies should also reveal the respondents' events to be transitional or fateful in their lives and how they make sense of them and connect them to their own cultural references (pp. 21-2).

As an Egyptian Muslim woman conducting research on Syrian refugee women in Egypt, my insider-outsider position significantly influenced data collection and analysis. My cultural and

linguistic fluency facilitated rapport with respondents, allowing for deeper insights. However, my privileged socio-economic class and non-refugee status created a gap, potentially affecting rapport and understanding. Constant reflexivity on my positionality was essential, ensuring fair representation of participants' voices. I grappled with Spivak's (1988) question of whether the subaltern can speak, aiming to avoid reinforcing Western epistemic hegemony. Drawing on critical reflexivity, I aimed to make knowledge production a form of solidarity and research a means of resistance by "breaking hierarchical barriers between researchers and participants" (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). This approach goes beyond the simplistic "confession of privilege" and is seen as a form of accountability and responsibility. It involves constantly reflecting on how one's research activities support resistance to epistemic colonization and avoid replicating colonial and hegemonic legacies (Lockard 2016; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS: THE IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT ON SYRIAN WOMEN'S MARRIAGE DECISIONS

Safaa, a middle-aged mother of two from a previous marriage who is currently married to an Egyptian man, stated half-joking that she was waiting for the war in Syria to happen so that she could leave her abusive Syrian husband and move to Egypt to find an Egyptian husband as she heard they treat their women well. Basema, similarly, who was in her mid-thirties and had never been married until displacement and meeting her loving husband, explained that she felt she had missed the marriage train in Syria after focusing too much on her career. However, after coming to Egypt and being bombarded by marriage proposals, this ended up "opening up her feminine side" making her more open to the idea of marriage. Nevertheless, not all stories are that serendipitous with clearly defined boundaries of agency. The women I interviewed can be categorized roughly into three groups: (a) a handful, like Safaa and Basema, who were happily

married and appreciate the quality of their Egyptian husbands; (b) a majority, like Ghena, Zeina and Aisha, discussed below, who mainly married as a way to navigate their new socio-economic location acknowledging their limited options post-displacement and who might be slightly satisfied or slightly dissatisfied with their current husband, whether for cultural, financial or compatibility reasons; and Finally (c) those, like Mohra and Shirin, also discussed below, who got married because they lacked other viable alternatives and for varying reasons and often after a thorough risk/benefit analysis chose not to exit the marriage. As a result, they experience a more precarious and vulnerable situation than before their marriage where they cannot leave the marriage or the country.

While for some Syrian families, options such as entrepreneurship have been a preferred approach to negotiate a troubled political, legal, and economic context (Moussa and Abdelgaffar 2023), for some other Syrian refugee women, marriage seemed like a more viable option, an option that was not as available to their male counterparts who face disruptions in fulfilling their traditional masculine roles, forcing them to find new ways to define their manhood (see for instance Suerbaum 2020). During my fieldwork, most respondents stated that shortly after arriving in Egypt, regardless of their marital status (e.g., divorced, widowed, single mother, or never married), they had multiple marriage proposals from Egyptian men belonging to different social classes. Informants characterized many of these marriages as *Quick*, or rushed taking place within a few weeks or even a few days after the initial proposal, which is not a typical practice in Egypt or Syria where marriage and wedding prep could take months if not years; *Polygamous*, where the husband already has a wife and is seeking a second wife; and *Customary* or *urfi*, marriages—marital arrangements that are limited to the religious ceremony and hence not registered with the state through official paperwork.

During the interviews, I asked the respondents if they would still marry their current husbands had their circumstances been different in terms of their experiences of the war and subsequent displacement (i.e., Would they have married the same person if they were still back in Syria). Some women enthusiastically affirmed that they would have still married their current husbands. In contrast, others hesitantly suggested that the limited options they had as refugees were decisive in choosing their husband (or, more accurately, the first available option). Thus, although they had some agency in initially agreeing to enter the relationship, their choices were constrained due to their displacement and gender, alongside various individual and intersectional factors like previous marital status, financial situation, and age.

This idea of limited options and its impact on understanding the spectrum within consent and coercion in marriage in displacement is the central focus of this section. Below, I illustrate the intricacies of weighing costs and benefits, trace the heightened precarity, and introduce the concept of double immobility. By delving into the experiences of some respondents and their decisions to marry Egyptians after displacement, I trace the reasoning and consequences for them and their families. I occasionally complement these accounts with encounters with other respondents facing similar constraints and limited choices. Through these diverse vignettes, I showcase how the concept of double immobility intertwines with “restricted” rational choice, offering insight into the complex decision-making processes these women undergo within the constraints of their marital and migration contexts while also highlighting the further marginalizing effects of this double immobility complicating discussions around consent and coercion within marriage at large and within the context of displacement and migration more prominently.

### 1.1. Losing hope in return redefines a “suitable” marriage

At the time of the interview, Ghena, was in her early thirties. She comes from an upper-middle class where she was already doing well financially and running a family business in Egypt along with her uncle. Ghena got married to a well-off Egyptian man whom she described as good-looking with a successful career. She explained that even though she is fond of her husband and has an understanding relationship with him, she would have preferred to marry someone from her “own culture.” Despite describing him as a suitable suitor, Ghena said that the main reason she agreed to marry a non-Syrian is that she was forced to leave her country:

*I: If you were back in Syria and the war didn't take place, and you haven't left, would you have married Mohamed with his current situation and personality?*

*R: Of course not! Because I wouldn't have considered marrying someone who is not from my own country, and I wouldn't have considered living in a country other than my own. Mohamed is very easy going but [...] I left against my will, and it's been five years. For the past two years, I wasn't able to visit Syria. Maybe if I had been able to visit Syria, I could have met a Syrian potentially.*

On the other hand, Mohamed, Ghena's husband, explained how he fell in love with her the moment he saw her in a coffee shop. He emphasized that his marriage was not motivated by *sutra*<sup>2</sup> (protection or sheltering) since he already supports many Syrian families financially. Mohamed was doing well financially and was married at the time he proposed to Ghena. He was happy with his first wife and even pleaded with her not to seek a divorce after his marriage to Ghena.

While polygamy is practiced to varying degrees in various Muslim societies and subcultures and social classes more than others, monogamous relationships and the nuclear family

are still the most commonly accepted forms in most Egyptian communities and the majority of the Muslim Arab world (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Thus, In Egypt, where polygamy is permissive, marriages to Syrian women, often involving *'urfi* (customary) and polygamous setups, face criticism and stigma. *'Urfi* marriages are informal, lacking official registration, and are often secretive, used to circumvent traditional marriage barriers, leading to furthering the stigma. Conversely, in Syria, similar customary marriages, known as *shar'e* (compliant with Islamic law), are culturally accepted and function like engagement, offering couples privacy and relaxed social norms, such as allowing the bride to remove her headscarf. This cultural acceptance diminishes the stigma in Syria, a contrast well understood by all interviewed women, Ghena included. Ghena and Mohamed's story by no means qualifies as exploitation or coercion by conventional standards, even though marrying Mohamed had not been her first preference. This can be explained mostly by Ghena's socio-economic location, which made marrying Mohamed one of the other options *if at all*. Still, in her mind, displacement has made marrying an Egyptian a sound, even if not a preferred option. Displacement redefined her standards of a "suitable" marriage.

Zeina was a newlywed young woman coming from the middle class who was well-educated and was currently working in an administrative role during our encounter. Similar to Ghena, Zeina signaled how displacement had shaped her perception of the available options and what a suitable marriage is and consequently in weighing the cost of such marriage. When Zeina first arrived in the country, she was convinced that she would soon return to Syria. As a result, she refused to live in the country and engage with its people. However, for her, losing hope in return was the main reason behind opening up to the idea of marrying an Egyptian, not the other way around:

*I started realizing that even if we returned, I would not be able to live without electricity, water, internet, security, stability, or money. Against this loss of hope, there was an increasing sense of settlement in Egypt. [...] Then slowly, I started adjusting to life here. At the same time, [her husband] was getting closer.*

This inverse relationship between losing hope in return and opening up to the possibility of marriage was echoed frequently in other respondents' accounts, such as in Aisha, a Syrian woman in her thirties from a lower-middle-class who was well-educated and used to work as a teacher in Syria but stopped working after displacement. At the time of the interview, she was married to Ahmed, a single father of two children, in a low-income area on the outskirts of Cairo, and pregnant with their first baby:

*I: You mentioned earlier that you completely refused the idea of marriage to an Egyptian because you didn't want anything to attach you to the country. What happened that made you change your mind?*

*R: We started realizing there was no hope. It was getting worse, and we started seeing more people arriving in Egypt, so I started telling myself it looked like we were staying. So, I stopped being picky about whether he should be Syrian, Egyptian or Indian [laughing]. I was worried about the differences in customs and traditions, but they kept saying the Egyptian man would appreciate the value of a Syrian wife... That's what they said.*

Thus, for Ghena, Zeina, and Aisha, the realization of their geographical immobility and the loss of hope in returning to their home country have significantly influenced their marriage decision, particularly in choosing to marry Egyptians and assessing the implications of this union. Such a decision, in turn, reinforced their geographical immobility and diminished

potential repatriation chances. Other intersectional factors, however, determine the sense of exacerbating the woman's immobility due to marriage, Nisreen, who had older kids from her Syrian first husband and none with her current Egyptian husband, resided in a small dwelling with her children, parents, and brother's family. She expressed that her decision to marry in Egypt stemmed from her dislike of having to work to support her family, but she also had a well-defined plan for financial independence if she ever had to leave her current husband.

*At any moment, [her husband] and I could get a divorce. How will I live then? Will I go back to work? I will save money and start a small business, and bit by bit, I will grow. Not for me, but for my children. And to prove to myself and others that I can live without a man, 'your presence in my life is not everything' [directing at her husband].*

Nisreen's shift in perspective and her assertion of independence is not solely a matter of principle; it is also influenced by her displacement situation, where she faces fewer legal implications due to not having Egyptian children and can leverage the social support network provided by her extended family — two advantages that mitigated her uprooting that Mohra and Shirin, that I turn to discuss now, did not possess.

## 1.2. [Compounded precarity due to post-displacement marriage](#)

Mohra was a 26-year-old Syrian mother of two when we met. Her story fits many aspects of the definition of sex trafficking especially in terms of using deception to bring her to the country. According to Mohra she was lured to Egypt by the man who would become soon her husband. He had offered to marry her and take her and her children out of war-burdened Syria. Mohra married her husband when she was still in Syria by mailing him a power of attorney, which he used to

legalize the marriage in Egypt. She traveled to him alone, hoping her children would follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social and economic situation in which he was living. Her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival. Having given birth to her “Egyptian” daughter, she is now forced to choose between leaving her husband, and thus leaving her Egyptian child behind, or suffering along with her Syrian children in Egypt every day. Mohra explained how she had lost all respect for her husband for various reasons, most important being that he allows her to seek donations from charities to support their household. Despite her complete dissatisfaction with her marriage, in the conversation below, she explained to me that saving her children from the war zone was worth the initial risk of the marriage as well as the current situation she is in:

*R: I was worried about them [her children] over there [Syria] from all the bombing. Here [in Egypt] is still much better. Back there, I didn't even send them to school. Even though after trying the Egyptian educational system, it is better for them not to be educated [sarcastic tone]. So back to our topic, I traveled to Syria to get them.*

As she reflected on her current situation, she started contemplating her options, which seemed limited due to her exile, dependents and lack of social support (*ghorba* and *sanad*)<sup>4</sup>, especially given her young age and fear of harassment as well as her inability to work while being a mother of young children. Furthermore, her lack of social support was complicated by a legal element: her pregnancy with her Egyptian daughter:

*R: I got pregnant, and I was upset about it. I can't go back to Syria and even if I got a divorce and took an apartment here by myself, will the Egyptians leave me alone? A woman and her children? Of course, I am going to be subjected to*

*harassment a thousand times. So, I can't take this step. I am here alone I don't know anyone. Who do I seek refuge in?"*

*I: Did you consider abortion?*

*R: No one would accept my case, not a pharmacist or a doctor or a medication*

*I: How did that make you feel? You are the one who will get pregnant and raise the child, and no one is helping you?*

*R: I felt like I was going to die. Even him, he didn't want the baby, and I didn't want it. I'm sure he knew someone who could help me. He would tell me: "Do the abortion away from me. I don't want to carry the sin". He would then change his mind and tell me, let's just keep it and I couldn't find anyone to help. And I gave birth to a girl.*

Mohra was convinced that eventually, she would end up separating from her current husband. However, when I followed up with her two years after our initial encounter, she was still *frustratingly* married to her husband, reinforcing a double immobility that I argue describes the mixed effects, nuances, and aggravations of her experience.

Shirin was also in her late twenties during our encounter. Her interview was particularly challenging in a revealing sense. She contradicted herself often and changed critical parts of her story halfway through during our interview. I initially intuited that she was not telling me the whole truth, which she later confirmed. During our interview, I kept repeating the same questions and imposing some assumptions to obtain more details while doing my best not to cross ethical boundaries. Every now and then, I would receive some bursts of insights such as the one below:

*I: What would you advise another woman in the same situation?*

*R: I would advise her to stay by herself and not get married. It is better and more dignified. I lost my children [from a previous marriage], and "One who lacks something cannot give it."<sup>5</sup>*

*I: What do you mean by that?*

*R: It means I have nothing to give to anyone anymore. Bottom line, I advise women not to get married.*

Shirin thus is another woman who weighed the risks and benefits of her situation, including her migration status, and chose to remain in her marriage, despite feeling stuck or unhappy. During the interview, Shirin presented herself as happily married, only to call me a few days later to confess that she had lied because she was afraid of her husband. Although he was not in the same room during our conversation, Shirin was worried he might be eavesdropping. She contacted me afterward, and we agreed on a password that she would give me before starting the chat conversation to make sure it was she and not her husband trying to trick her and me, signaling deep emotional and psychological intimidation.

Although she did not refer to any physical abuse, Shirin described emotional and economic abuse recalling being kicked out of the house after some arguments and sleeping in the street more than once. She contacted me hoping for legal guidance to explore options that would help her gain financial independence. Shirin mainly was thinking about financial aid, *not* a job opportunity since she also has an Egyptian child by her husband, which complicates her options (of leaving the marriage and leaving the country). For her, like many other uprooted mothers in my study, paid work is not a viable option because she would have to spend her income on childcare; even if she were to find a job that could help her afford childcare, she might not be able to bear the harassment of her husband's family after divorce. Shirin also mentioned her desire to flee the country and join

her older children (from her previous Syrian husband), who had risked their lives on a boat to seek asylum in Germany. Still, even that would not be possible unless she was willing to leave her Egyptian toddler behind. Her marriage is immobilizing, thus compounding the effects of her displacement.

Both Shirin and Mohra felt stuck in their marriages, but their resentment did not translate into expressing the will to leave their current husbands as they weighed their risks and benefits. Mohra was adamant that she would eventually find a way to leave the country with all her children and declared her lack of interest in remarrying despite her very young age. Shirin, who was not interested in working whatsoever, hinted that a possible solution, or a way out of this immobility, would be to leave her current husband for another one (she did not specify her criteria in a potential subsequent choice of partner). Such a prospect might offer her protection from harassment by an ex-husband and his family while also providing for her and her son financially. Recognizing the nuances of double immobility aids with understanding gendered decision-making in displacement contexts and challenging simplistic narratives of consent and coercion.

## DISCUSSION: UNTANGLING THE MARRIAGE-DISPLACEMENT NEXUS

For Ghena, Zeina, and Aisha, the realization of their geographical immobility and the loss of hope in returning to their home country have significantly influenced their marriage decision, particularly in choosing to marry Egyptians and assessing the implications of this union. While they find themselves unable to leave the country, they do not necessarily feel trapped or coerced in their marriages. This perception was influenced by their socio-economic status including their educational backgrounds, and relative financial independence as well as their families and social support. Nevertheless, being married plays a significant role in maintaining their situation in Egypt. Instead of merely being an outcome of their displacement, their marriage reinforces their

geographical immobility and diminishes potential repatriation chances. However, as comes more explicitly in Mohra and Shirin trajectories, the distinction between coercion and consent becomes increasingly blurred, and the immobilizing effect of marriage, compounded by displacement, becomes more pronounced. Their lower socioeconomic status compounded by their dependent children plays a pivotal role in shaping their available options and choices compared to other childless women who decided to end their marriage.

Mohra and Shirin's trajectories offer a unique interpretation and even expansion to Stephen Lubkemann's (2008) notion of involuntary immobility: a term used to analytically decouple the meaning of displacement from that of migration, in order to include other notions such as those "displaced in place," not as a result of their own movement but rather because of the war's immobilizing effects" (p. 456). In this sense, I posit that some respondent's marriage experiences cannot be captured by the forced/voluntary marriage or the coercion/consent whether at the inception or in the decision to continue the relationship. Rather, they experience double immobility, a term I coin—building on Lubkemann's concept—to refer to accounts for the marriage implications on furthering the displaced women's mobility. In this vein, after having been forced to migrate to flee war in her home country, Mohra and Shirin went through a secondary displacement—in place—in the receiving country, an immobilizing one due to the dual effect of war and marriage. Their precarity was not just the product of their socio-economic status or migration status but also the lack of social support networks such as extended family and the presence of their marital status with their Egyptian dependents that complicates their legal and migration situation. However, both remained in their marriages, highlighting the enduring challenges of double immobility. That is, the combined effect of war, marriage, and pregnancy has molded in

their double immobility initially forcing them out of their country and later complicating their hoped repatriation to Syria leaving them more vulnerable than before marriage.

Furthermore, intersectional analysis demonstrates that not all vulnerable women are equal demonstrating the social, economic and legal complications caused by displacement in shaping some of the factors for the women when assessing their risks and benefits. Despite exemplifying an uneven spectrum of satisfaction, compromise, coercion, and entrapment in their marriages, they weighed the risks and benefits of entering, remaining, or leaving, all while considering factors such as social support networks (having a family to support them financially and with childcare), legal implications (not being able to leave their Egyptian children behind) as well as their assessment of their socio-economic security. While Ghena was not explicit about her reason for marrying, she did express that she would have made a different decision had she not been displaced. In this sense, while marriage affected the sense of mobility for most of the interlocutors, the degree and impact varied depending on socio-economic factors. For example, Ghena's financial independence (economic capital) and Nisreen's extended family support (social capital) influenced their perceptions of feeling trapped in the marriage and navigating other aspects of displacement differently than others like Mohra and Shirin.

The concept of double immobility provides a useful framework for understanding how marriage and displacement intersect to shape individuals' experiences. By examining the intersecting axes of gender, race, class, marital and family status, social and economic capital, and nationality, this framework reveals the complex dynamics of marriage and migration. It highlights that consent and coercion are not binary opposites but are interconnected, influenced by social expectations, control dynamics, and individual identities within systems of domination (Anitha and Gill, 2011).

A central argument of this study is to challenge the characterization of such marriages as merely forms of coercion or exploitation, despite the often uneven power dynamics between the couples, acknowledging the complexities of agency within these dynamics. Respondents, aware of their social locations and constraints, weighed the risks and benefits of these unions to navigate their resettlement paths. Despite their drawbacks, these marriages offered advantages such as financial support, legal status, cultural adaptability, and protection from gendered harassment. This reshaped the meaning of refugee resettlement beyond traditional markers (e.g. housing and employment), redefined the parameters of a suitable marriage (e.g. for social re-rooting), and blurred the lines between consent and coercion, as well as between forced and voluntary marriage.

## CONCLUSION

For many Syrian women, marriage represents the sole alternative to homelessness, hardship, or harassment. Consequently, some women felt compelled to remain in marriages, even if they were abusive, unhappy, or marked by incompatibility, settling for what was available or enduring loveless unions. This dynamic underscores the oppressive structures of patriarchy and classism, which restrict women's choices, especially those who are displaced. It aligns with a broader trend accentuating how female domestic violence victims often remain in abusive relationships due to factors like maintaining family order, love attachments, fear of harm, or lack of external support (Heron et al., 2022; Ho and Pavlish 2011).

The intersection of factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, and migration status initially may enhance mobility for some Syrian refugee women due to their social desirability as wives, but these same factors can later intensify oppression and marginalization, restricting their mobility and agency within marital and migration contexts. This situation complicates their ability to leave undesirable marriages, contributing to what I termed here as double immobility. This concept

elucidates how these constraints intersect and reinforce each other, amplifying the marginalization and precarity of particular groups of women in abusive or undesirable marriages. By considering the impacts of poverty, cultural practices, social capital, and legal structures exacerbated by displacement, double immobility enhances our understanding of the complex dynamics in gendered displacement and mixed marriages, transcending simplistic binaries of coercion and consent, and highlighting rational choices within restricted options. It underscores the need for a nuanced, contextually grounded approach to address these challenges, recognizing the intersecting inequalities and power dynamics that shape these women's experiences.

In this paper, I sought to demystify the gendered experiences of displaced women, which accentuates the transactional and malleable meaning of marriage across time, culture, and space. By scrutinizing the meaning and purpose of marriage and examining how interlocking privileges and oppressions push the boundaries of consent and exploitation, this study uncovers a complex social phenomenon and practices of self-rescue amid restrictive resettlement options, a flawed refugee system, and increasing border securitization. The exploration also highlights the striking diversity within a group often perceived homogeneously as victims, emphasizing the nuanced realities they face. The interlocutors' narratives reveal varying degrees of immobility shaped by displacement and marital status, indicating a state of marital in-betweenness—neither forced nor entirely voluntary. Emphasizing the continuum between consent and coercion in entering and remaining in marriages helps to illuminate the experiences and challenges faced by refugee women more clearly. This nuanced conceptualization considers the calculated risks and intersectional factors shaping marriage experiences in displacement, where marriage can become a strategy for self-rescue and resettlement. Double immobility encapsulates the compounded precarity faced by some Syrian refugee women as they navigate both their marriages and host countries advocating

for an understanding that acknowledges the intersecting inequalities affecting gendered decision-making in displacement.

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<sup>1</sup> Bridewealth, also known as bride-price or marriage payment, is a traditional practice where the groom or his family offers payment to the bride's family to formalize a marriage. This payment plays a significant role in these cultures, symbolizing the marital commitment and often signifying the end of the marriage when the bridewealth is returned. It involves not only economic exchange but also social and symbolic reciprocity, being one element within a broader series of exchanges between the families involved (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014)

<sup>2</sup> Some of the respondents referred to marriage as *sutra* (in another spelling *sotra*), an Arabic word literally meaning “to cover” that is often used to indicate protection or sheltering (see, for instance, Allasad Alhuzail 2020; Taha 2020; Acim 2017). *Zawaj al-sutra* (protection or shelter marriage) is a familiar notion, even if not practiced widely in Egypt. In such a case, the man is motivated to marry a widow, especially that of another man who died because of war, with the intention of providing her and her children with a livelihood and emotional support.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Krenawi & Graham (2003) estimate that polygamous households represent only 2 to 11.5 percent in the Muslim Arab world.

<sup>4</sup> Many of the respondents referred to *sanad* (social support or social capital) and *sutra* (protection and sheltering) as central motivations for them to consider marriage in *ghorba* (best translated as exile or uprooting). As such, *sanad* mainly refers to a form of a social network, often on the familial level, that creates social support, social capital, or a safety network that enables individuals to navigate their social life and surroundings while feeling safe and confident. The need for this social network is not restricted or utilized by refugees alone. Instead, it is necessary for individual well-being, allowing them to access resources and achieve goals (Hanley et al. 2012). Nevertheless, among the respondents, their uprooting and the sudden loss of their social capital have made many perceive marriage as a strategy to restore such *sanad* and safety.

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<sup>5</sup> Faaqid ash-shay' laa yu'teeh. "فاقد الشيء لا يعطيه" a common proverb means that a person who does not have a particular quality, resource, or knowledge cannot provide it to others.