

Agency of silence: Female Syrian refugee workers and the reconstitution of the post-war self

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Abstract

This study explores the working lives of female refugees who, living in the backstreets of major cities in the Global South, are often inaccessible to research. Most were housewives before their exile but must now find paid work to support their children. This ethnographic study shows that the only employment available to these women is domestic work and cleaning – occupations that are doubly stigmatised in their tradition and threaten their desire to rebuild honourable selves destroyed by war and displacement. Drawing on the work of the poststructuralist anthropologist Saba Mahmood, I argue that these refugee women reconstitute honourable selves through the *agency of silence*. I illustrate how, through agentive practices of silence – such as invisibility, concealment, renaming and refusal to speak – these female refugees protect their deeply desired valorised status while performing stigmatised work. In exploring the reconstitution of the honourable post-war self through the agency of silence, this study (i) makes a feminist contribution to the emerging field of refugee studies within management thought by extending understanding of female refugee agency in the Global South and (ii) develops the theory of the agency of silence that enables the reconstitution of the self, thereby advancing scholarship on organisational silence.

Keywords

agency, dirty work, domestic work, feminism, Islam, refugee studies, Saba Mahmood, silence, stigma, Syrian refugee women

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Introduction

One of the largest humanitarian crises since World War II involves, globally, 117 million forcibly displaced people, including 37.6 million refugees. Over half are women and children who have fled wars in, notably, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine. Many arrive in neighbouring countries that have limited resources (Espiritu et al., 2022). Often traumatised and mostly widows, they endure conditions of extreme precarity and must find work to rebuild shattered lives. Scholars of management and organisational studies (MOS) are developing insights into the adaptation strategies of female refugees in relation to professional work settings in Western countries (Fernando, 2024; Groutsis et al., 2024), as well as the coping strategies of women residing in refugee camps (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022). However, little is known about the agentive practices of female refugees who escape to neighbouring developing countries (Fotaki, 2022) and find themselves working in the backstreets of cities such as Istanbul.

This study addresses this gap in knowledge by exploring how the agency of silence enables female refugees from Syria, whose lives have been destroyed by war and displacement, to rebuild their sense of self through paid work. Largely denied formal work permits, they work in informal economies where they are invisible and difficult to study. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of them survive by working as domestic cleaners, but they are an exceptionally hard-to-access group because, as this study illustrates, they refuse to talk about their work, keeping it secret because of the double cultural stigma attached to it. By gaining access to this elusive group, I show that their silence about their employment is not a sign of passivity, but rather a modality of agency that enables the reconstitution of honourable selves. I demonstrate that, even in seemingly impossible circumstances, refugee women exercise agency to rebuild dignified lives.

This study involved ethnographic research with Muslim female refugees¹ from Syria exiled in Turkey, one of the largest sites of inward refugee migration in the world. Their escape from Syria to the comparative peace of Istanbul involved hazardous journeys that imperilled lives already severely threatened by the Syrian war. As ‘guests under temporary protection’ (Baban et al., 2017), they face discrimination in employment because of their legal status, gender, ethnicity and language (Koyama, 2015). They are denied work permits (Ertorer, 2021), struggle to survive on incomes below subsistence level (Üstübcici and İnce, 2020), and are expected to eventually return to Syria (Al Jazeera, 2022).

In this study, I present accounts of 76 Syrian women who were previously housewives and only engaged in paid work after becoming refugees. I show that, despite challenging circumstances, these women strive to maintain the valorised identity of the pre-war honourable self: a housewife for whom work outside the home would threaten her honour and that of her family. In post-war exile in Istanbul, paid work is a necessity, yet the only such work available is domestic work, which, as this study demonstrates, is doubly stigmatised: honourable Syrian women must not participate in paid work, especially not in highly despised domestic and cleaning jobs. Employment, therefore, plunges them into a traumatic paradox: those who do this ‘unclean work’ are stigmatised, disrespected and dishonoured; the much-desired identity of the ‘honourable woman’ is undermined but, without this employment, their families would struggle to survive. They resolve this paradox through agentive practices of silence – invisibility, concealment, renaming and

refusal to speak. Their silence is neither an ‘antithesis of voice’ (Pinder and Harlos, 2001), nor a ‘passive act’ (Morrison, 2011), nor an enforced silence (Donaghey et al., 2011) resulting from control and normative pressures, nor is it simply an act of resistance to patriarchal norms (Keating, 2013). Refugee women’s silence, I will demonstrate, is a modality of agency that enables the reconstitution of the desired honourable self.

Before proceeding, it is important to explain the critical terms used in this article. In poststructuralist theory, the self is not pre-given, stable, fully formed or homogeneous (Gilmore and Harding, 2022), but is constituted continually through language, norms, bodily practices and gestures (Mahmood, 2005: 120–121). This process of constitution is agential. Here, ‘agency’ refers to a ‘modality of action’ that informs individual practices and is not merely a form of resistance to social norms (Mahmood, 2005: 157).

This study makes two contributions. First, by expanding existing understandings of female refugee agency in the Global South, it offers a feminist perspective on the emerging field of refugee studies within management thought (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Groutsis et al., 2024). Existing literature has focused on the coping strategies of female refugees in response to prolonged liminality in the refugee camps of the Global South (e.g. Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022), or on strategies for integration into professional work settings in Western countries (Fernando, 2024; Groutsis et al., 2024). This study extends this literature by exploring how refugee women living in the backstreets of major cities in the Global South exercise agency in rebuilding their sense of self through paid work. It advances feminist refugee studies in MOS by foregrounding silence as a form of agency exercised by a rarely studied group of Muslim female refugees, and by demonstrating that they are not ‘passive’, as often portrayed (Espirito et al., 2022), but highly agential individuals who ensure their own survival and that of their families. In doing so, this study also broadens the emerging scholarship on Muslim women within MOS (Jamjoom and Mills, 2023; Nazzal et al., 2024).

Second, this study develops the theory of the agency of silence, thereby advancing scholarship on organisational silence (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Fernando and Prasad, 2019). Theoretically informed by poststructuralist anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s (2005) analysis of agency, I argue that refugee women use agential practices of silence to reconstitute a sense of an honourable self after war, trauma and displacement. The agency of silence, I show, enables the reconstitution of the self (Cabantous et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2017; Kenny, 2010; Riach et al., 2016). This study thus moves beyond conceptualisations of silence as a sign of ‘passivity’ (e.g. Morrison, 2011) or resistance (e.g. Donaghey et al., 2011) arising from control and domination and instead shows how silence itself is agential. Taken together, these contributions explore the reconstitution of an honourable post-war self through the agency of silence in the forced migration context of the Global South.

In the sections that follow, I first review literature on refugee studies and silence within MOS to frame the research, emphasising the stigmatised, domestic work performed by refugee women. I will then describe the study’s theoretical location within Saba Mahmood’s (2005) writing. After discussing my methodological approach and describing how I was able to gain access to this elusive population, I present the study’s findings and conclude by offering a theory of the agency of silence.

Refugee studies in MOS

The distinction between migrant and refugee workers cannot be overemphasised. The former migrate voluntarily for work, the latter suffer enforced migration, often fleeing for their lives to escape war, persecution and violence (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2016). Many refugees, traumatised and forced to leave everything behind, have no prospect of returning home.

There is growing interest in refugee studies among management scholars, focused primarily on refugee employment (e.g. Lee et al., 2020) and the institutional and organisational practices of refugee workforce integration (e.g. Guo et al., 2020; Nardon et al., 2020). There is substantial research into practices for accommodating and integrating refugees (e.g. Ortlieb and Knappert, 2023) and also into the professionals who work with them, such as social workers (e.g. Mencütek and Nashwan, 2021). Researchers have explored how NGOs operate within refugee camps (Kodeih et al., 2023), how they demonstrate solidarity with refugees (Fotaki, 2022), how institutional practices affect refugees' inclusion and exclusion (Kangas-Müller et al., 2023) and how professionals make sense of the refugee crisis in Western countries (Van der Giessen et al., 2022). The precarious working conditions of refugees have been revealed (Razzaz, 2017), as has the social capital available to them in the course of labour market integration (Gericke et al., 2018). Refugee camps have been revealed as 'organisations' in which officials and refugees are mutually dependent (De La Chaux et al., 2018) and where control is often achieved through violence (Arnold and Costas, 2024).

The macro-level approach of this body of research has been complemented more recently by studies of the micro-practices of refugees in their new work environments. For instance, Fernando (2024) investigated the strategies of refugees with professional backgrounds when seeking to 'fit in' to UK workplaces, while Groutsis et al. (2024) examined a female refugee's repudiation of refugee stigma through emancipatory resistance in an Australian company. However, there is little research on the micro-practices of non-professional refugee workers in developing countries, where most refugees reside (Fotaki, 2022). Exceptions include Syrian refugee women's negotiations of liminality through craftwork in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022), and their material-discursive boundary-making and invitational practices in organising digital 'homes' in camps in Lebanon (Hultin et al., 2022). I extend this nascent stream of research by exploring the agency and everyday lived experiences of Muslim female refugees living in the backstreets of Istanbul who, working in an informal, precarious economy, re-establish a sense of self in conditions of immense challenge.

Syrian refugees living in Turkey form one of the largest refugee populations in the world. The Syrian war, starting in 2011, created a humanitarian catastrophe, forcing 6.5 million Syrians into exile (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024). Of the 3.8 million Syrians exiled in Turkey between 2011 and 2021 (Presidency of Migration Management [PMM], 2024), 70% were women or children; nearly a third of refugee households are headed by women (United Nations Women, 2018). Annually, around 100,000 Syrian men are granted work permits in Turkey, but only 7000 Syrian women (Ministry of Labour and Social Security of Turkey, 2024). Female refugees have limited personal resources, advocacy, institutional support, language skills and work experience

(Knappert et al., 2018); they are exploited, low-paid and often endure sexual harassment (Üstübici and İnce, 2020).

Cultural beliefs and religious norms impact female refugees' labour participation significantly (United Nations Women, 2018), often stigmatising both workers and their work (Ayoub, 2017). Because working with men may be culturally inappropriate (Razzaz, 2017), many women choose home-based jobs (United Nations Women, 2018) or work in 'female' occupations (Senthanar et al., 2021). Pre-war, the minority of Syrian women who engaged in paid work occupied professional or governmental roles. In exile, many Syrian women have taken employment in the exploitative textile and agriculture sectors (Korkmaz, 2017). In the absence of statistics, it has been suggested that few take on domestic work (Razzaz, 2017), but this study shows that Syrian refugee women *do* engage in domestic work and cleaning, albeit they are often inaccessible to researchers in this context.

Domestic work is internationally stigmatised as 'dirty work' (Anderson, 2000). As Douglas (2002: 161) posits, 'dirt' is indicative of 'a threat to good order, and therefore, is regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away'. 'Dirty work' imposes a physical, emotional, moral and social taint on workers (McMurray and Ward, 2014). Nevertheless, certain populations undertake dirty work (Tyler, 2011) and develop positive identities (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). A more recent recognition that dirt is culturally 'malleable' (Douglas, 2002) emphasises the significance of context in understanding 'dirt' and 'dirty work' (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022). The agency of 'dirty workers' is, thereby, 'geographically and temporally situated' (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022: 2181), influenced by cultural processes, recognition practices and power structures. This proves important in this study, in which concepts of 'dirty work' originating in Western contexts (e.g. Bosmans et al., 2016) are insufficient to explain the experiences of Syrian refugee domestic workers who use silence as a modality of agency.

Silence in organisational settings

Organisational silence is often characterised as 'employees' disinclination to speak out' (Fernando and Prasad 2019: 1567). It is seen as the absence or antithesis of voice (Pinder and Harlos, 2001) and is considered either a passive act (Morrison, 2011) or a reluctance to discuss organisational (dys)function (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2024: 305). Silence may be enforced through organisational structures that lack mechanisms for employee voice, fostering cultures of silence (Donaghey et al., 2011). Employees are likely to remain silent when they feel disempowered (Morrison et al., 2015), especially under managerial control, often due to fear of career repercussions (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). In this perspective, silence is seen as a significant 'barrier' to organisational learning and change (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). These studies tend to be concerned largely with how management imposes silence on individuals to suppress their voices, positioning it negatively and as a consequence of control (Stouten et al., 2019).

A significant body of literature explores how silence operates within power dynamics and as resistance to normative pressures (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Fernando and Prasad, 2019), with feminist perspectives viewing it as resistance to patriarchal norms (Clair, 1998; Keating, 2013). Fernando and Prasad (2019) examine how female

academics facing sex-based harassment are silenced by third-party actors such as managers through micro-discursive interactions and persuasive counter-arguments, with silence seen as ‘an attempt to reduce dissonance by reluctantly acquiescing to the idea that there might be no further need to voice’ (Fernando and Prasad, 2019: 1585). Brown and Coupland (2005) show how graduate trainees often experience silencing due to organisational discourses that impose normative pressures; sometimes, they employ silence strategically to align with organisational expectations and become valued managers. Thus, silence can function as an ‘accommodative’ and ‘non-disruptive’ form of resistance in pursuit of career goals. Rauch and Ansari (2025: 1215) describe how medical professionals in war zones use silence as a ‘purposeful strategy for maintaining emotional equilibrium’, enabling them to regulate emotions while focusing on critical tasks. These studies illustrate how individuals may be silenced by organisations and/or use silence strategically to regulate emotions or direct career aspirations. While these studies offer important insights, they also point to the need for a deeper exploration of how silence acts as a modality of agency through which individuals constitute themselves as specific subjects. I extend this literature by offering a theory of agency of silence that enables the reconstitution of the self. I turn next to discussing Mahmood’s influential work that informs this study.

Theoretical framework

Saba Mahmood, an influential anthropologist and non-Western feminist theorist, contributed significantly to transferring Michel Foucault’s (1992, 1997) theory of ethical subject formation and Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of performativity to non-liberal traditions. Mahmood (2005) added reflexivity to the work of these theorists, blending it with Islamic philosophy in her groundbreaking book *Politics of Piety* to account for the performative formation of pious subjects in Islamic ethical traditions and develop an understanding of pious Muslim women’s religious and cultural enactments of agency (Jamjoom and Mills, 2023). Her powerful theory has decolonial imperatives (Velji, 2024) that have strongly influenced the social sciences and humanities (Fadil and Fernando, 2015).

Mahmood (2009) challenges prevailing Western perceptions of Muslim women as passive, non-agentive subjects of patriarchal cultures. In critiquing Western discourses on Muslim women, Islam and religious forms of living, Mahmood (2001, 2009) highlights the lifeworlds of non-liberal and non-Western ‘Others’, arguing against the notion that they act ‘out of deference to tradition or an antiquated cultural code by default or lack of choice’ (Kapur, 2019: 49). What Western thinkers perceive as passivity and docility, she argues, are forms of agency (Mahmood, 2005: 15). Mahmood (2005) introduces new vocabularies, rejecting dominant Western concepts of subordination, consolidation, resistance and subversion of norms, which, she argues, do not adequately explain non-Western experiences. Mahmood (2005: 160) seeks to understand the agency of women not only when they resist norms and traditions but also when they conform to and identify with them, showing how such attachments form a positive discourse of being in the world. In showing how women desire to embody and transmit a living Islamic tradition, Mahmood makes agency theory relevant to societies vastly different from the secular

cultures that inform Western scholarship. With almost a quarter of the world's population (1.9 billion people) identifying as Muslim, including at least 800 million Muslim women (World Population Review, 2024), Mahmood's work is especially significant to an understanding of the broader population of female Muslim refugees.

For Mahmood, agency is exercised by women constructing themselves as subjects of their tradition, culture and religion. Agency is recast: it is 'not synonymous with resistance to relations of domination, but a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create' (Mahmood, 2001: 210). She rejects universal concepts; concepts, she argues, take diverse forms and shapes across different ethical traditions (Prasad, 2009). Agency, therefore, should be analysed 'within the grammar of [the] concepts within which it resides' (Mahmood, 2005: 34); it is open and emergent. Understanding agency as resistance to control or power dynamics (Collinson, 2000) is legitimate in the 'historically contingent discursive traditions [of Western countries]' (Mahmood, 2005: 32), but in non-Western contexts, agency must be comprehended through its ethnographic particularity, where vastly different configurations of personhood may form. Accordingly, this study explores the ethical traditions that inform the lives of Syrian female refugees.

To emphasise, Mahmood's insights require a focus on agency and a rejection of any notion that Muslim refugee women are *subordinated* to culture, religion or other presumably restrictive conditions. Rather than attempting to 'give voice' (Spivak, 1988) or present a resistance-focused analysis (Abu-Lughod, 1990), Mahmood (2005: 16) argues that Muslim women must be understood as acting within their own terms and grammar of language, terms that 'are not simply a gloss for universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience' (Mahmood, 2005: 16).

Embodiment is central to Mahmood's thesis of subject formation, in which religious virtues are lived through Muslim women's bodies. Mahmood introduces to MOS something largely missing from the discipline: bodies as 'vital, sensory, material and ephemeral intensities [that] exceed language' (Harding et al., 2022). For Mahmood (2005), bodily practices are 'the terrain upon which the topography of the subject comes to be mapped' (p. 121), through 'practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and transformation in the subject who practiced them' (Hadot, 2002, cited in Mahmood, 2005: 122). Embodied practices, in conforming with norms, shape inward dispositions, such as feelings and desires: 'one's practices and actions determine one's desires and emotions' (Mahmood, 2005: 157).

Mahmood's theory of embodiment builds on Butler's (1993: 240) theory of performativity, grounded in Butler's statement: 'One becomes a subject through performativity, which is not an act or a performance, but constantly repeated "acts" that reiterate norms'. Performativity is a 'form of self-making' (Butler, 2021: 40) and a 'repeated stylization' of acts that 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990: 33). For Butler, the continuous, reiterated formation of an embodied self is enabled by discourses, norms and materialities (Harding et al., 2022: 653). Mahmood (2005) describes two significant extensions of Butler's theory of performativity: (i) in Islamic traditions, the body's outward conduct (e.g. gestures, actions)

shapes the inner self (e.g. intentions, desires), requiring individuals to vigilantly align their inner state with their actions (p. 31); (ii) performativity does not challenge traditional norms but reinforces them (p. 163). Pious subjects are formed through the performance of bodily practices and embodiment of virtuous qualities such as *al-ayā* (shyness, diffidence, modesty). Virtuous actions are performative because they ‘enact that which they name: a virtuous self’ (Mahmood, 2005: 163). Virtues such as modesty, sincerity, humility and virtuous fear are performative acts that hold constitutive power in enacting a pious self. This is crucial in understanding the practices of agentive silence.

Mahmood’s analysis of agency has much potential for postcolonial organisational studies, as demonstrated in the examination by Jamjoom and Mills (2023) of Saudi female managers’ subtle resistance to gender power dynamics. They argue that resistance to masculine structures arises not from direct opposition to norms but from alignment with religious values. Thus, resistance is shaped by Islamic teachings rather than gender equality discourses and is targeted not at patriarchy but at other power relations. My study builds on this pioneering use of Mahmood’s (2005) work by exploring agency within norms that are ‘not simply a social imposition on the subject but constitute . . . her intimate, valorised interiority’ (p. 23). Importantly, these norms are specific to the particular contexts of Syrian refugee women. This interpretation of Mahmood’s work and its extension into discussions of embodiment and discourses is fundamental to the arguments made in this paper.

Methodology

Situated in a poststructuralist epistemological location, this study’s empirical materials derive from ethnographic fieldwork carried out for my doctoral research between October 2021 and June 2022, involving observations and interviews with 76 female Syrian refugee domestic workers in Istanbul.

Poststructuralist feminist ethnography examines women’s lifeworlds, relationships, experiences, feelings, perspectives and senses, exploring operations of power that construct bodies, personhood, knowledge, subjectivities and experience (Mahmood, 2005). It analyses the diverse terms by which women organise their lives, enabling exploration of the constitution of women’s subjectivities within frameworks of concepts and norms that shape their agency (Abu-Lughod, 2015), and through which they ‘speak back to the normative liberal assumptions about human nature’ (Mahmood, 2005: 5). Foregrounding the feelings, senses, voices, refusals and recognitions of indigenous, subaltern, marginalised, under-represented and disadvantaged populations, it interrogates the ethical, political, epistemological, spatial and temporal dimensions of experience and knowledge within larger fields of power (Visweswaran, 1994).

Feminist ethnographers in this tradition eschew the detached observer’s standpoint (Madison, 2006) and instead strive for the ideal of ‘knowledge-without-power’ (Minh-Ha, 1989: 40). Acknowledging the inevitable intertwining of knowledge production with power requires the researcher to interrogate her own power and vulnerabilities (Koning and Ooi, 2013). The term ‘research participants’ contradicts this ethos, so I replace it with ‘sister’, the term we – researcher, translators and participants – called each other throughout our shared time in Istanbul. Aligning with Marilyn Strathern’s (1987)

concept of a 'natural kinship' between women, I sought not to explore the 'Other' but a related 'we'. That is, I pursued 'inclusive reflexivity' to produce knowledge through intersubjectivity while remaining reflexive about the limits of reciprocity in field encounters (Koning and Ooi, 2013: 17). Inherent to this is my own identity as Turkish, female and a practising Muslim who wears a headscarf and dresses modestly. As a member of the host community with the power of Turkish language and a British university affiliation, I was, nevertheless, greeted as 'sister', an appellation that seemed to supersede all others. In both Syrian and Turkish cultures, the use of the term 'sister' for someone unrelated is a signifier of respect and care. My own customs and beliefs also encouraged the incorporation of the premises of sisterhood into this study. This 'sister outsider' status, someone neither entirely the same nor completely different (Minh-Ha, 1988), eased access and interactions.

Fieldwork required a 'return to the [ethnographer's] body' to traverse initial encounters in which understanding was generated through touches, silences, sensory exchanges, gestures and sensory knowledge in lived moments (Madison, 2006). For instance, sisters' reluctance to speak about their work was revealed in gestures such as hand and body movements, as well as facial expressions. They refused to put this vocabulary of 'work' into their mouths. I sensed the need to adapt my language: avoiding terms such as 'cleaning', instead using vague references such as 'this', 'that' or 'what you do'. These forms of silencing – communicating without words or avoiding the use of certain words – were to become the language of my fieldwork.

Following poststructural feminist principles, 'fieldwork' became a coalescence of the researcher, sisters and ethnography into emergent 'research'. It spun me into an emotional apprenticeship in which I learned from Syrian women and the scars they carried from the war in an environment that encapsulated the time, place and knowledge of sisters living in/as female refugee bodies.

Research setting

Fieldwork was conducted in four working-class districts of Istanbul – Fatih, Ümraniye, Esenyurt and Kağıthane – home to over 530,000 Syrian refugees (PMM, 2024). It took place within a challenging socio-economic and political context in which refugees became useful scapegoats for far-right politicians (Al Jazeera, 2022). Shared religious values ease Syrian sisters' adjustment to Turkey, but life in Istanbul remains challenging: living costs are high and employment is difficult to find.

Despite Istanbul hosting many Syrians, finding 'participants' was difficult. Fear of repercussions from Syria's Assad regime deterred some, and I was to find that the stigma attached to cleaning work led many to remain hidden. After months of effort and slow building of trust, I persuaded some female NGO workers, committed to the well-being of women and aiming to prevent exploitation, to make some introductions. Eventually, I received verbal consent from a number of Syrian sisters to initiate observations of their daily lives, in which I became emotionally engaged.

I met 76 women, all Sunni Muslims, mainly from Aleppo and Damascus, who practised daily prayers, veiling, and who fulfilled religious and cultural obligations such as fasting during Ramadan, attending women-only gatherings, and minimising interactions

with unrelated men. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55, with the majority being in their 30s and 40s. Many had married young, aged 15–20. About 10% had higher education diplomas, the rest were high-school graduates. Pre-war Syria was a middle-income economy; most women recalled a ‘comfortable’ economic background, some having been wealthy, while a few had struggled financially. Pre-war, only one had worked outside the home. Among their number, 40 were widows, 28 were still married, 5 were separated and 3 were single. All, except the single women, had children. They had arrived in Turkey between 2011 and 2018, a few of them legally, via Turkey’s open-door policy, but the majority smuggled in as border controls increased.

Most of the women were receiving assistance from the EU-backed ESSN programme and other organisations, but these do not cover rent and basic needs. Domestic work offers a rare opportunity to earn cash, and its flexibility reduces associated childcare concerns. In terms of their work roles, 71 were cleaners, 3 were cooks and 2 were nannies, but cleaners also handle tasks such as cooking, making it difficult to always distinguish roles because duties shift according to employer demands.

Methods

Fieldwork had two stages. Stage 1 involved non-participant observations with 21 Syrian domestic workers who spoke Turkish. I engaged in daily activities at their homes and met them in mosques and parks and at events, always with their consent. Their reluctance to discuss their occupation now became apparent and, now alerted to the silences that persisted throughout my fieldwork, I incorporated details of these forms of silence into my notes, using notebooks, head notes, field notes and jottings.

Stage 2 involved 53 in-depth interviews with 76 Syrian refugee domestic workers, either one-to-one or in focus groups. Each of these lasted between 60 and 240 minutes and followed a life-narrative form. Most sisters invited me to their homes to continue the conversation informally. Mindful of their traumatic experiences, I sometimes chose not to probe too deeply into areas of sensitivity.

All of the observations and interviews followed ethical guidelines. Verbal consent was sought at initial meetings that explained the research, after which some chose not to participate. Anonymity was assured, informed consent obtained, and the rights not to answer questions or to terminate the interview at any time were emphasised. No one chose to withdraw, although several chose not to be recorded. Interviews were conducted in Arabic and Turkish, primarily in mosques or the women’s homes. Most interviewees consented to audio recordings, and I made detailed notes of interviews not recorded. For the Arabic interviews, I worked with female translators: three Syrian, one Turkish and one Yemeni-British. The interviews facilitated by the Syrian and Turkish translators were conducted in Arabic and translated into Turkish in real time; I then translated the Turkish transcriptions into English. The interviews facilitated by the Yemeni translator were also conducted in Arabic but translated into English. The translators became friends rather than colleagues, and sisters to the participants. I briefed the translators beforehand about the women’s reluctance to discuss their work and the need to avoid terms such as ‘cleaning’ and ‘domestic work’. Consequently, the translators were attuned to the women’s choice of words, and they observed their sisters’ body language when the topic of

employment was raised. We noted, for instance, when women covered their mouths, spoke behind their hands, put their heads down or looked away when talking. They often spoke in whispers.

I listened to all of the audio recordings, reviewed all of the transcriptions with the translators, noted whispering and other changes of voice, and cross-referenced observations in my field notes about corresponding body language and anything else from the interviews that was inaudible. Consideration of the original Arabic words and meanings proved essential; again, I ensured accuracy by collaborating with the translators.

The focus-group interviews sometimes occurred spontaneously and sometimes by arrangement. The sisters knew each other, lived close to one another, and often worked together. They introduced me to other sisters. The interviews provided insights into how the women articulated their experiences and interacted with each other, while the observations provided a deeper understanding of cultural patterns and lifeways.

The emotional impact of involvement in this study was profound. Some of the women became visibly distressed, and we would pause the interview until they explicitly expressed a desire to continue. There were many hugs, and I often had to forego my identity as a researcher and become a sister called upon to offer care and emotional support, while the Syrian translator's background in therapy was invaluable. I maintained contact with the sisters, ensuring they had ongoing support. None reported any adverse effects from their participation; on the contrary, several expressed relief at having told their story, sometimes for the first time.

Situating ethnographic analysis

Ethnographic data analysis involves both 'in-the-field' and 'out-of-the-field' analyses (LeCompte and Schensul, 2012). Here, the analysis, driven by ethnographic hunches (Pink, 2021) about silences, was divided into two main stages: understanding the female self and understanding silences. I immersed myself in notebooks, head notes, field notes, jottings, transcripts, photographs, WhatsApp messages, memories, imaginaries and recordings. This enabled complex, interwoven connections between the fieldwork observations and the transcripts, where verbal, visceral, sensory and affective resonances became interconnected.

Stage 1: Understanding the female self

This stage involved two sub-stages: (1a) analysing the forms of the self that emerged in the data; (1b) identifying dominant themes.

In Stage 1a, I used personal pronoun analysis (Harding, 2008) to identify forms of the 'I' that spoke, how each 'I' was constituted or rejected, and how the honourable, desired 'I' governed the subordination of a shameful 'I' that barred constitution of the desired self and prevented this latter 'I' from speaking.

Stage 1b involved an ethnographic thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes, guided by Mahmood's (2005) approach. I immersed myself in the sisters' discursive constitutions of past and present, their contradictions and fragmentations, and embodied self-making practices. This revealed a recurring discourse of 'honour', which

formed the first theme: the desired ‘honourable self’. In contrast, descriptions of domestic work were saturated with the language of ‘shame’, stigmatisation and challenges to virtue. This led to the second theme: the impossibility of constructing the honourable self. The third theme emerged from the application of Mahmood’s discussions of women’s embodied practices. After further immersion in the transcriptions, recordings and field notes and ‘remembering’ my observations of the women’s whispered conversations, gestures and body language, this third theme identified was agential practices of silence.

Stage 2: Understanding silences

The analysis of silence unsettles most qualitative analysis methods, which are ‘preoccupied with such longings for access to the subject’s voice’ (MacLure et al., 2010). Silence evades data analysis’s focus on language, rendering formal coding processes impossible. Instead, therefore, I first identified silences and then examined the language (verbal and embodied) surrounding those silences. Thus, analysis of silences involved two sub-stages, in the first of which (Stage 2a) I collated a file containing examples of silence from all of the interviews that, on being organised, suggested four interconnected forms of silence: ‘invisibility’, ‘concealment’, ‘renaming’ and ‘refusal to speak’. These illustrate, respectively, how discussions about domestic work are hidden under alternative expressions, obscured, whispered or intentionally left unspoken.

In Stage 2b, I analysed the statements surrounding each type of silence, seeking to identify how each form of silence is constituted and the performative work it does. This involved recalling the affective and sensory dimensions of those silences, including my emotions when women cried and my sensing of the grief lingering in many homes. It required a retrospective ‘re-insertion’ of myself into the encounters with the sisters, in which I transported myself back, in memory, to the interviews. I read and re-read my field notes, listened to the audio recordings of the interviews and used artefacts gathered during the fieldwork to stimulate these memories. I re-experienced visceral and embodied sensations, feelings and emotions in ways described by Mahmood (2005); discursive and embodied practices can enable understanding of the past’s shaping of the present. Before discussing the four interconnected forms of silence identified and how they were experienced in the encounters, I explore the two dominant themes within which these forms of silence reverberate.

The desired, honourable self

These sisters carried with them, as they fled Syria, their traditions, and cultural orientations, including their sense of the ideal, honourable self. That tradition’s ‘discursive formation’ (Foucault, 1972) shaped and shapes their subjectivities, determining ‘the possibility of what is debatable, enunciable, and doable in the present’ (Mahmood, 2005: 115). Their past lives in Syria had been, they said, ‘beautiful’ and ‘comfortable’. Nida, a 41-year-old mother of five from Damascus, spoke with great longing about her pre-war life:

My life in Syria was beautiful. My husband and I had everything we needed, including our own home . . . But when my husband was killed by the Assad regime, our beautiful life ended with him. We had to smuggle ourselves out with my children. It was a dangerous journey; we walked and slept in the mountains alongside many strangers. When we arrived in Istanbul, we had nothing except our clothes on our bodies and no one to turn to for help. It was humiliating to accept food from others . . . I had to start cleaning houses to feed my children, and I felt so ashamed to do it.

Like most Syrian women, Nida had been a housewife before the war. Now, she feels humiliated by the work she has to do. The past is a ‘constitutive condition of understanding and formulation of the present and the future’ and ‘the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted’ (Mahmood, 2005: 115). Nida, describing her past, invites us into a tradition that valorises family unity. A gendered division of labour was normative – 75 of the 76 women in this study had been housewives before the war. Jamela, a widow from Aleppo with a middle-class background, remembered:

I studied in Damascus. When I finished my studies, I came back to Aleppo. My father valued education for women . . . However, we didn’t need to work afterwards; we were studying not for work, but for our culture and our children.

The role of women was to be ‘good mothers’, well-educated and well-mannered, prioritising tradition. Paid work was regarded as men’s duty, as Jamela continued:

In Syria, there was no need for a woman to work because men took care of everything, including household needs and children. All of this was the man’s responsibility [she smiles]. A woman was expected to stay at home, look after the children, and manage all domestic affairs.

Many sisters echoed the sentiment that women had no ‘need’ to work. Outside the home, women’s work, such as volunteering, should be ‘for fun’. Jamela continued: ‘It was even considered shameful (*ayb*)² for a woman to work’. I mean, people would look at her and say, ‘This girl is working, what is wrong! Why is she working? . . . This is shameful.’ Working women reflected severely on their husbands’ breadwinning capabilities: honourable masculinity depended upon men’s abilities to support their families.

This gendered division of work echoed throughout the study, across all classes, as Safaa encapsulated: ‘I never worked in Syria. Going to work as a woman was shameful’. There were exceptions, seen for example, when Translator Haya intervened to say: ‘No, it’s not shameful for women to work in Syria’. Safaa responded: ‘It’s a shame (*ayb*) in Aleppo. It’s because you are from Damascus’, that is, the more globalised capital city. Others from Aleppo echo this:

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Nawal: | There would be big issues for the family if we worked . . . It is not part of our culture. |
| Faiza (Translator): | Ah, yes, my family in Yemen are the same. |
| Beyan: | Yes, women stay at home, and men get everything for us. |

The identity of the housewife was valorised, as Rana implied:

Before the war, I was a housewife. I lived a life of honour and luxury, whether in my family's home or with my husband. I got married when I was 17 years old. I was with servants, decency, honour and prestige.

This valorisation applied to all income groups. Maryam, for example, asked whether she had worked, replied: 'No! Absolutely not. We were poor but lived with dignity'. The valorised role of the housewife is inseparable from that of the honourable mother, whose primary focus should be her children. She is expected to adhere to traditional virtues and societal moral codes. For both men and women, virtuous qualities included a modest demeanour, valor, generosity, trustworthiness, piety and a refusal to tolerate disrespect. The importance of honour cannot be underestimated; it is a pivotal discourse in Arabic societies (Abu-Lughod, 2016), 'a wide-ranging, dynamic, multi-stranded ideology about "right living" that is constituted by a set of expectations about the appropriate ways for men and women to "be" in the world' (Baxter, 2007: 738). 'Honour' governs everyday lives; a discourse that shapes ways of being and acting that must be understood within an ethical tradition and through the micro-practices it governs.

For five of the sisters, the honourable self took on a new dimension during the war: saving their country from the authoritarian Assad regime through volunteering for work with the opposition. Imprisoned and tortured, Salma recounted: 'I did nothing except oppose the Assad regime and advocate for freedom and democracy in my country. I got involved in the opposition to save my country, my home, and my children'. Lila poignantly described being '... arrested and severely tortured in prison for participating in activities against the Assad regime', having become a fighter '... after they killed my husband, arrested and severely tortured my son, sister and father, and killed my brother and nephew in my house'. That these women had previously been housewives illustrates the fluidity of the dominant discourse of 'the honourable woman'.

This 'housewife' is not passive but has the potential to call into action an agentive power if circumstances require. These sisters expressed pride and honour in their oppositional wartime activities. The power of the honour discourse is encapsulated in Fatima's remark: 'I don't fear anything anymore because, after the war, all I had left was my honour'. Inevitably, the self's discursive constitution is informed by the material (physical) experiences of their extreme losses. The war introduced a new vocabulary of fighting, justice, victory and survival to their constitutive discourses, extending honour's meaning, showing that it can flex to encompass seeming contradictions such as the 'modest' housewife who is also a wartime activist.

Honour governs the identity of both housewives and mothers, who should be devoted to their children. These sisters' traumatic histories and continuing struggles for survival inform the constitution of their honour. Neither Dima from Aleppo, who said, 'I did not work; I was precious in Syria', nor Halimah, Amira, and Zainab from Damascus imply passivity when they recall:

Halimah: My life was comfortable in Syria. When my husband was alive he said to me, 'I don't want you to work until the day I die', and this really affects me. Every time I work, I remember this [starts to cry].

- Amira: In general, women in Syria are honoured; women rarely work because work is the prerogative of men, to meet women's needs and requests.
- Zainab: Prior to the war, I did not need to work, and the money came to me from my husband without any trouble.

Honour links a dignified, 'beautiful' past and a refugee present. This 'honourable' past forms the foundation through which subjectivities and self-understanding are constituted in exile. It illuminates a social imagination in which paid work is a husband's obligation that endows men and women alike with honour, imbued in men by their ability to act as breadwinners. Both Aisha and Zena emphasised this, Aisha looking at her husband as she said: 'If my brothers in Lebanon knew that I did this (cleaning) work, they would take me to them [i.e. their home]. They wouldn't want this'. To Aisha, who has five children, working outside the home as a cleaner means feeling uncared for, unloved and dishonoured by a husband who has failed to provide for the family. Likewise Zena, when we discussed wedding ceremonies, smiled as she remembered her husband: 'When Syrian girls get married, we don't have to pay for anything in the wedding ceremony, we don't buy furniture for our homes, and we don't work after getting married. But you Turkish girls, you pay for everything and work full-time: I don't know what you leave for your husbands to do'.

Zena, in emphasising the difference between the two cultures, echoes a recurring sentiment that 'in Syria, men used to bring everything to a woman's feet'. Men's labour added value whereas women's labour signified loss of value. To fail as a breadwinner profoundly compromised a man's honour within and outside the family. This perception of the husband pervades the sisters' narratives. Aisha is one of the few exiled women living with her husband, yet she belittles him. It may be that the husbands who reverberate through these accounts never existed in the form imagined, and neither perhaps did the honourable housewives, but it is their existence in the discursive constitution of the (exiled) self that is important. Within this work ethic, women are not victims but active players in the construction of an honour ideology. They do not feel themselves subservient to men, as Tehani illustrated:

In Syria, we never used to work. Previously, working was considered shameful. We were queens of our houses. *Alhamdulillah* (praise to God), we did not need anything. In Syria, we were poor, not rich. But we owned houses, and our husbands provided food for us.

There were repeated references to housewives as 'queens of the house'; the masculine figure echoing through their discourses, obliged to care for their 'queen', was both powerful and powerless. They experienced agency as housewives conforming with norms regarding honourable lives. This suggests that patriarchy is not a single, homogeneous system but varies between cultures, with relationships of domination that may be culturally determined and arise from 'specific relations of subordination that create and enable capabilities of action' (Mahmood, 2005: 29). Constitution of exiled, post-war selves incorporates agentive desires to be dignified and respected housewives, as the sisters emphasised in a focus-group interview, Rana and Dureen nodding in agreement when Fairuz said: 'What we want to be is housewives (*sitat al-beyut*). If war ends, we will go back to how we were, to our origins, we will not work. Woman's work is shameful'.

These sisters contradict feminist arguments that the concept of honour is employed to control women (e.g. Wikan, 2008). Here, honour is a much-desired status, a crucial part of the sisters' sense of self. Mahmood (2005) would also disagree with Western feminists. She argues that 'norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted . . . but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways' (p. 22). Thus, Syrian women are not victims but moral agents actively nurturing an honour rooted in their sense of self. Honour is integral to their identity, a demand for recognition of the self as worthy of equal respect, rather than despised as a refugee.

This theme illustrates how female Syrian refugees carried into exile the normative concept of ideal, honourable selves: housewives who abjure paid employment. This discursive construction of the past is performative: it constitutes these women's desire to 'be' in this world, a desire that cannot be fully grasped within dominant Western discourses of 'the housewife' (Oakley, 2018). Agency must be understood within 'the grammar of concepts within which it resides' (Mahmood, 2005: 34); that is, in the traditions in which these women are immersed, where the 'very foundations of attachments that create subjectivities' are located (Mahmood, 2005: 154). For these female refugees, their grammar of concepts has expanded grievously to encapsulate the worst of warfare. Through their desire to construct and sustain the identity of the honourable housewife, they, in some ways, verbally expunge their war-torn selves, demonstrating that 'the honourable housewife' is not a trivial aspiration but integral to the (re)construction of the self. This construction can, however, be undermined by domestic work, as the next theme illustrates.

The impossibility of constructing the honourable self

If women bring with them into exile a desire to maintain the norm of the honourable self who does not undertake paid work, a norm now diffracted through the trauma of war and exile, then we already see intimations that the sisters in this study, all of whom earn an income from some form of domestic work, experience challenges in reconstituting that ideal self. Further challenges arise, as this theme reveals, from the additional stigma attached to cleaning work. Nada explained:

In Syria, most women are housewives, and each woman cleans her own house . . . It is considered embarrassing for a [Syrian] woman to work in another woman's house to clean it. Working as a cleaner is typically viewed as a defect or implies humiliation.

Hooriyah echoed this sentiment with the rhetorical question: 'We did not have any cleaner in Syria. Why would a housewife need another woman to clean her own house?' Sana provided further insight: 'It was shameful to hire a Syrian woman to clean your house'; before the war, domestic work was undertaken only by migrant workers.

Thus, both the deficient housewife and the (paid) cleaner are defiled identities. The stigmatisation is two-way: women are considered 'defective' if they clean others' houses and also if they do not clean their own. Why is cleaning someone else's house 'embarrassing' while cleaning one's own is 'honourable'? A conversation provided some answers:

- Nadira: Very few individuals show respect and acknowledge your work.
Manal: People tend to look down on those who work in cleaning.
Yousra: Cleaning someone's house is seen as an insult. When you go to a house and scrub the toilets . . . their dirt . . . Do you understand?

Yousra's clarification of the comments of Nadira and Manal is important; she draws a distinction between others' dirt and one's own. While the latter is regarded as 'clean', taint-free, cleaning the former is 'dirty work' that makes the doers 'dirty' and imposes a physical, emotional, moral and social taint. Its impact is exemplified in Ala's recollection of starting a cleaning job:

I'll never forget [my first day as a cleaner]. I cleaned with tears in my eyes because this work is not our work. A person finds it very hard. How can I explain this to you? You used to be one thing, and now you have become someone else.

Both Yousra and Ala struggled to find suitable words and instead sought an empathetic understanding of feelings that might transcend language ('Do you understand?' [Yousra]; 'How can I explain this to you?' [Ala]). Others did not allow the language of cleaning to enter their vocabulary at all, communicating instead through sensory exchanges involving silence, reframing and touch, conveying meaning through embodied understanding in lived moments. This was especially evident early in the fieldwork, where meaning was expressed through eyes, body language and gestures of refusal or hesitation rather than words. Notable examples included women averting their gaze, looking away, or casting a long, contemplative look in my direction, often lowering their heads whenever the topic of cleaning was mentioned. That cleaning is 'not our work' signifies its contradiction with and erosion of cherished values and traditions. Ala was a middle-class housewife before becoming, following the war's eruption, an active opposition member. She endured torture in Syria and fled to Turkey, where cleaning provides her sole source of income. The magnitude of the stigma of cleaning is palpable in the diminishment it brings to someone with the strength of character to resist the Assad regime. It transforms her into a 'someone else' she does not want to 'be'.

Lila explained further. A mother of four from Damascus, she joined the opposition after her beloved husband and other male family members were killed by Assad's regime. She endured severe torture before fleeing to Turkey, where:

When I worked as a house cleaner, my daughters considered the idea of me doing that work disgraceful, especially if their husbands or in-laws were to find out. They found it unacceptable . . . I wanted to preserve my dignity and self-respect . . . We come from a family known in our hometown for its self-respect and pride. So, my children couldn't accept this work in any way.

Lila, brave and fearless during the war, is diminished by domestic work. She demonstrates that the stigma she experiences differs from that experienced by domestic workers in the West. The stigma of cleaning extends to her entire family, erasing her honourable and heroic past life, bringing disrespect powerful enough to jeopardise her children's marriage prospects. Lila's identity is now primarily that of a 'mother' who must prevent

the contagion that cleaning carries from infecting her family and relatives by marriage. Prior to her daughter Zahra's marriage, both Lila and Zahra stopped cleaning.

Sitting silently with Lila, I sensed her deep suffering, conveyed through her bowed head and slumped shoulders. When she spoke, the singular 'I' was absent, shattered during the war by her husband's death. The 'I' returned when she spoke as a mother, discussing her children. Why did such a powerful woman, a housewife turned activist, yield to her daughter's wish to quit cleaning work? Zahra's response to my question of why she found her mother's cleaning work 'disgraceful' provides an explanation:

It has to do with our traditions and culture. In Syria, we didn't have this . . . [silence] . . . you know what I am talking about . . . It's not right to do this work . . . If someone from my husband's family or my in-laws were to ask me, 'What does your mother do?', would I say she's a house cleaner? No! For us, it's considered humiliating and degrading, making us feel inferior in society, and people won't respect us . . .

'The cleaner' becomes a pollutant that threatens to strip her entire family of its dignity. Zahra does not explain *why* this job has such destructive power, but her mother, Lila, clearly understands the scale of its destructiveness, something from which she must protect her daughters.

The account of Salma, from Damascus, provides an echo of this. She was tortured in prison for 9 months for joining the anti-Assad uprising and her sister-in-law suspected that she had been raped while imprisoned. Although Salma's husband defended her, the suspicion was sufficient to exclude her from her extended family and neighbourhood. Culture and religion intersect in Salma's account: 'I fear that my daughter will be harassed or insulted by one of the employers' male relatives, so I insisted on taking on unoccupied houses to prevent her from experiencing such things'. By raising the sanctity of female chastity within the Syrian tradition, Salma points to another source of cleaning work's stigmatising powers. Chastity is a crucial virtue for Arab women's honour (Abu-Lughod, 2016), involving premarital abstinence, modest behaviour and attire and limited interactions with unrelated men (Mahmood, 2005). Salma's statement reflects an embedded understanding that being alone with men invites suspicions of sexual assault and, consequently, the destruction of honour. The mere presumption brings unbearable shame and a stain that spreads through the entire extended family. The stigma of 'dirty work' not only renders cleaners 'dirty', but also turns them into unvirtuous subjects that the community must exclude. Sisters thus face a cruel paradox: they fail their families if they don't do this work (no income) but also if they do (dishonour). Salma's mitigation is to clean unoccupied houses where, with no men around, at least doubt cannot be cast on her chastity.

Nora provides more detail of the thinking around the norm of chastity in this context:

I have never in my life thought that the day would come when I would clean people's houses. For us, it is *ayb* (shame) for the woman to work, especially in this field. If a woman works in this work, she is not a good woman. I go to the houses of people I do not know, what if their goal is something different? How do I go to people's houses that I do not know?

The most striking aspect of Nora's traumatising by her work is being made 'not a good woman', that is, a dishonoured one; she reflects Salma's concerns about the assumptions of defilement that attach to being alone with a man. Likewise, in her account of the humiliation attaching to her first day as a cleaner, Lama describes this understanding of chastity in terms that distinguish it from that of other cultures:

When I entered the house, I found about ten young men and women. I had to bend over and go up the stairs and show a little of my arms and my neck while cleaning . . . It is our custom that young men should go out when a woman enters a room, but they remained sitting in the room I wanted to clean . . . So I left the house without finishing my work.

Lama, like other sisters, wears a hijab and embraces modesty in all areas of her life. Revealing any flesh is forbidden; any compromise to full coverage undermines this modesty. Lama's anxiety helps us understand that her hijab is not a signifier of her Muslimhood but an 'integral part of the entire manner of existence through which one learns to cultivate the virtue of modesty in all aspects of one's life' (Mahmood, 2005: 51). The seemingly mundane act of showing 'a little of my arms and . . . neck' can have potentially catastrophic consequences, challenging an 'entire way of being and acting' (Mahmood, 2005: 56). Cleaning work's stigma is thereby magnified: it is not only contact with others' dirt that renders cleaners dirty; other aspects of the job jeopardise their chastity and threaten to pollute their families.

Furthermore, fears of defilement cannot be separated from physical vulnerability, as articulated by some of the younger sisters. Ramia and Shermeen, for example, told of men who offered them cleaning jobs but subsequently assaulted them sexually and attempted to lure them into prostitution. Such men assumed that young, widowed refugees living in precarious situations and desperate for money would be exploitable. Recognition of this reality is inherent to Nora's rhetorical question: 'What if their goal is something different?' Not only does cleaning diminish the sisters' pride and expose them to the risk of being regarded as dishonourable and/or unchaste, akin to prostitutes, but it also exposes them to the risk of actual sexual assault.

Leen provides another example of the paradox engulfing these women as they struggle to maintain their reputation as 'good women' while also fulfilling their fundamental task as 'good mothers' by ensuring an income to feed their children:

If you say you are working in people's homes, you feel embarrassed. I was a good girl, and my family's situation was very good. You come here, and you try to work so you can bring food, but you feel ashamed when you tell them to give you money. There's no one here to ask if you don't have money to eat . . . So, this (work) makes me fearful for my reputation, my children, and everything else.

Leen's self-description as 'a good girl' encapsulates such virtues as being 'polite (*muhadhabat*), clean (*nazifat*), educated (*muthaqafat*), sympathetic (*mutaeatifat*), gentle (*latifat*), chaste (*eaifat*) and shy (*khajulat*)', as described by Leila, the translator from Damascus with whom I worked. Women who fail to embody these virtues are cast out from the community, their previous 'goodness' or heroism forgotten. In exile,

the vocabulary incorporated into their language during the war – of bravery, strength, determination and fearlessness – is forgotten. As refugees, they become mothers who must provide for their families while protecting their feminine virtues of modesty.

Theme 1, the desired, honourable self, explored Syrian refugee women's desired identity – their pre-war honourable selves that they seek to constitute in exile. Theme 2, the impossibility of constructing honourable selves, illustrates the paradoxes they face in attempting that constitutive work. Not only do they share with cleaners elsewhere the stigmatisation of working with others' dirt, but cultural and religious norms impose the further stigma of a sexual taint that undoes their modesty virtues. Such dishonourable individuals bring shame to their kin. These sisters occupy an impossible situation: they fail in their duties as mothers if their children cannot eat or fail in their duty to protect the honour of their family by undertaking that stigmatised and stigmatising employment that brings money to feed their children. Theme 3, agentive practices of silence, explores how they tackle this dilemma agentively.

Agentive practices of silence

This final theme concerns how these sisters reconcile that traumatic paradox, primarily through agentive practices of silence. These practices differ significantly from the bravery and resilience that helped them survive war, torture, bereavement and flight, but hint at the ingenuity needed to ensure survival. Four different practices of silence emerged from the data analysis: invisibility, concealment, renaming and refusal to talk.

Silence as invisibility. The first practice of silence, invisibility, was evident in Dunia's narrative. She is a widowed mother of two who lives with her brother and his family. I visited her after she returned home from work. Her sister-in-law, who supports Dunia by babysitting and helping conceal her job from the family, served us cardamom coffee as Dunia told me about her work:

I started cleaning unoccupied houses, but I asked my employer [a recruitment agency] to keep it a secret so that no one would know . . . This job . . . allows me to remain hidden, and I can provide for my children. No one sees me, no one judges me in this work, nobody knows what I do, no one works with me, and nobody bosses me around.

Dunia's invisibility offers an initial insight into agentive silence: she 'remain[s] hidden', specifically choosing to clean unoccupied houses to maintain this invisibility. She shared this practice with many other cleaners who deliberately worked in empty houses, requested confidentiality from employers, and/or intentionally avoided conversation with employers while cleaning. Whereas invisibility is imposed upon cleaners in Western countries as they become invisible to clients or employers while performing 'dirty work' (e.g. Rabelo and Mahalingam, 2019), Syrian refugee cleaners in Istanbul actively seek to render themselves invisible, thereby both preserving the secrecy of their employment and to avoid seeing 'themselves' as cleaners. This invisible self cannot be engaged in conversation; neither seen nor spoken to, she is an *absent self*.

Through ‘invisibilising’ themselves and not discussing their work, these sisters preempt the identity of a cleaner, refusing its construction. That is, they reject the performativity of the word ‘cleaner’ (Butler, 1997; Mahmood, 2005).

Silence as concealment. The second practice of silence, concealment, was introduced by Salma, who I was told worked as a cook. I sat in her room, waiting for her daughter, Ruba, to leave, sensing the need for discretion. I broached the topic timidly: ‘My sister, when you go to cook in one of the houses, do you do other tasks, such as cleaning or taking care of the children?’ Salma paused, gestured toward a corner of the room to which we moved to avoid being overheard and, speaking in a whisper, said:

The truth is that before I worked in the cooking profession, I used to clean apartments with my daughter. But I do not like to talk about this issue in front of my daughter because it makes her feel ashamed and humiliated . . . Cleaning houses makes us feel humiliated . . .

Despite working together, mother and daughter could not talk about the job in front of each other. They do not allow the words ‘cleaning’ or ‘work’ to issue from their mouths, and are even more circumspect around other relatives:

But we do not tell anyone. I tell my husband and children that I am cooking . . . When my mother asks me what I did today over the phone [she calls daily from Syria], I respond that I cooked for one of the families. I never mention that I clean people’s homes.

Salma illustrates that while cleaning represents ‘humiliation’, ‘cooking’ carries connotations of care, nurture and, for her, enjoyment. Cooking provides a culturally acceptable reason for being outside the home. She, the cleaner, can be out in public, but her identity as a cleaner is concealed behind titles that do not convey dishonour and are not necessarily associated with being in paid employment. Salma’s agency, like that of other sisters, emerges through finding new words to conceal the ‘humiliating’ and stigmatising term ‘cleaning’ (Mahmood, 2005). It is a strategy that is subtly different from the next strategy of silence: renaming.

Silence as renaming. Renaming is a discursive form of silence, as illustrated by Wafa, who defines her work as ‘help’. She had worked as a cleaner for 8 years, unbeknownst to her husband, explaining: ‘My husband knows this not as a job *but as a way to help*. He doesn’t question me since he knows sister Halime [employer]. However, persuading him to let me go to Halime’s house was quite challenging’. ‘Help’ implies an act of kindness. By replacing ‘work’ with ‘help’, Wafa removes the stigmatising connotations of paid work and cleaning, giving herself a permit to leave the home to earn an income. This linguistic legerdemain establishes Wafa in an honourable role in which the family’s reputation is safeguarded. Likewise, Hiba said:

I clean my landlady’s house, but my husband is unaware of it. He believes I visit her just to have tea or help . . . He would prefer to work 24/7 himself rather than allow me to engage in cleaning. He would never accept that I leave our house to clean other people’s houses as it would be an insult to him.

Hiba, sharing her secret with her landlady, protects her husband's reputation and contributes to the family income by describing what she does as 'help'. This suggests that for some sisters, the physical act of cleaning can be tolerated if it is not labelled as 'work'. 'Cleaning work' assaults their identities as virtuous women, but 'help' contributes to virtuousness. Alya also describes her cleaning job as 'help', in this instance of her brother, who decorates unoccupied houses. Although paid by her brother, Alya labels what she does as 'caring', a virtuous activity. For Alya, as for all the women who refer to their work in these terms, renaming is a protective practice that preserves honour by transforming stigmatising work into virtuous help.

Renaming is a form of silence that dispels the negative connotations of cleaning work. Farah illuminates how the term 'worker' is also relabelled. She invited me to her home for breakfast with her mother and her sisters, Yara and Saba, who worked with her. Our lively conversation about Farah's wedding in Turkey grew cautious when the topic turned to work. Farah mentioned her employer, Yasemin, an NGO activist who helps refugee women: 'It's been four years since I met sister Yasemin, so there is appreciation. I go to her house to help with cleaning because I know her. I do it out of appreciation'. Farah relabels her work as an act performed 'out of appreciation'. Trust is a crucial aspect of this relabelling; Yasemin is relabelled as well. Rather than an employer, she is a caring 'sister' who enables Farah to transform her activities into 'appreciation' instead of 'work'. Such appreciation involves intimacy, sisterhood and trust, removing the connotations of stigma otherwise attached to cleaning activities.

I asked Farah if her husband knew about her visits to Sister Yasemin. She replied, 'I do not go to work, so it is okay'. My repeated encountering of this refusal to label actions as 'work' required me to find a language that aligned with theirs. Rendered unable to call what they did 'work', I found myself silenced by their practices of silence, colluding in their accounts in which, rather than citing the dignity of work, as heralded in Western contexts, they translated what they did as 'help' and 'appreciation', using a language of care, including gratitude and pure feelings, a linguistic adjustment that makes 'cleaning' a doable act.

Practices of silence, therefore, include invisibility (not working in places where they could be identified as cleaners), concealment (using linguistic subterfuges that allowed them to leave the home), and renaming (making cleaning respectable by attaching different labels). Their practices of silence are embodied, discursive and intuitive and prevent damaging their honourable being (Mahmood, 2005). There is a fourth practice of silence: *refusal to talk*.

Silence as refusal to talk. The fourth form of silence practiced by these women is the refusal to speak about their work. This requires separating mind and body, as Nora demonstrated: 'I don't mention this in front of my children, so they don't get embarrassed by me'. Here, the use of 'this' distances Nora from what cannot be discussed openly, implying that 'her' work is not really hers. When I revisited Nora, she was more open but still distanced herself linguistically from the work, refusing to use possessive pronouns and referring vaguely to 'this' or 'that' but never 'her' work. Nora did not re-label 'cleaning':

I leave my house feeling fearful that people will know what I work as. I mean, I could be cleaning, and whilst I am cleaning, I think, what if my mother and my people knew that I do this work? What would they say of me?

Rather than relabelling, Nora distances and disassociates herself from her labours by referring constantly to ‘this work’ and never ‘my work’. Her body performs acts of cleaning, but her mind refuses it; she rejects the identity of ‘cleaner’. This refusal forms a duality: body and mind are separate entities, the body silenced, unspeaking: ‘They (employers) say things . . . but I stay quiet. I don’t like to get into conversations; just tell me where you want me to clean. I don’t like to talk and be in conversations. It will give me a headache’. In refusing to speak, Nora transforms her body into a machine for cleaning, devoid of a ‘thinking self’ that would view her labours as shameful. She creates a distinction between body and mind, thereby detaching embodied, physical actions from her ‘honourable self’.

These four practices of silence are embodied (discursive, and non-discursive), helping to prevent damage to the reconstitution of the honourable self (Mahmood, 2005). They are not discrete but inform one another; for example, while both involved embodied silence, renaming allowed the sisters to discuss their activities and refusal to speak placed ‘work’ outside the grammar of employment. However, something else influenced the practices of silence living in their bodies: trauma. Trauma lies outside the ‘grammar of representation’ (Pollock, 2013b: 3), rendering experiences almost unspeakable. Dana, from Damascus and in her 40s, was the NGO worker who connected me with these workers. Three months into my fieldwork, I told Dana in despair that the women she connected me with had not spoken about their work and I did not know what to do. Dana listened with exhausted yet compassionate eyes and responded:

Most Syrian women would rather die of hunger than work as a cleaner in someone’s house . . . In Syria, I was a French teacher and the daughter of a wealthy man. When the war started, we fled to Turkey and lived for two years in a refugee camp under very harsh conditions . . . A kind Turkish woman who saw that I needed help asked if I could clean the stairways. I cleaned the apartment stairways while crying. It was very difficult and hurt my pride deeply.

I had known Dana for over a year before she finally shared her traumatic escape and revealed her work as a cleaner. Throughout that year she embodied silence – it inhabited her body, her senses, her entire being. Cleaning work, her perilous flight from Syria and her experiences in war and refugee camps were not sayable. Dana’s silence, like that of many refugee sisters inhabited by trauma, is embodied, infused into their existence, an integral part of their very being. As feminist theorist Pollock (2013a: 161) writes so eloquently, ‘If silence is a discursive terrain of pain, then speaking it exposes the embodied subject to renewed exile – to wincing embarrassment . . .’. For these sisters, traumatised by the Syrian war, silence is an agentive act that both conceals and reveals their pain, and a constitutive practice in the struggle to resolve the paradox of becoming honourable mothers.

The embodied practices of silence identified in this third theme indicate that the desired self of Syrian women as honourable individuals (theme 1) is fundamentally challenged by working as cleaners (theme 2). These sisters seek to reconcile an impossible dilemma by

enacting forms of silence, concealing their work, relabelling it, rendering themselves invisible, separating thinking mind from labouring body, or refusing to speak. Exiled selves, shattered and traumatised by war, bereavement, torture and profound loss – much of which may not be speakable – aspire to conform with the norm, carried with them from Syria, of ‘the honourable woman’. That identity is negated by the doubly stigmatised work they must engage in, but they circumvent that negation by deploying agentive practices of silence.

Discussion

This study sought to explore how the agency of silence enables female refugees, whose lives have been destroyed by war and displacement, to rebuild their sense of self through paid work. The analysis has shown that their agency emerges from the refugee sisters’ deep desire to honour the norms and traditions of their Muslim Syrian culture and rebuild the selves they had been before the war, those of the ‘honourable housewife’. In exile, these Syrian sisters face a traumatic paradox: while they must work to support their children, the only work available, domestic work, is doubly stigmatised in the Syrian tradition and undermines the virtues by which the desired, valorised honourable self is defined. Not only is the work ‘dirty’, it is also ‘shameful’ and ‘dishonourable’, with such destructive power that it transforms women into ‘dishonourable’ subjects. To resolve this paradox, they employ agentive practices of silence – invisibility, concealment, renaming and refusal to speak – that enable them to rebuild a sense of the honourable self through refusing recognition of themselves as domestic workers.

This study makes two substantial contributions. First, it provides a feminist perspective on the emerging field of refugee studies in management thought (Fernando, 2024; Hultin et al., 2022) by expanding existing understandings of female refugee agency in the Global South. The emerging literature on female refugees within MOS has tended to focus on the coping or adaptation strategies of female refugee workers in the Global North (e.g. Senthanaar et al., 2021) or those living in refugee camps (e.g. Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022). For example, Fernando’s (2024) account of skilled female refugees in the United Kingdom explores how they negotiate a sense of fit within professional settings by strategically managing their pasts, emphasising or minimising them accordingly to address perceived skill gaps, while Groutsis et al. (2024) also focus on refugee women working in professional roles in the West, demonstrating how they engage in emancipatory resistance to repudiate stigmatising ‘refugee’ narratives in a corporate environment; Alkhaled and Sasaki (2022) focus on the indeterminate liminality of female refugees residing in camps in the Global South and show how they reclaim agency through craft-work. In contrast to these studies, I show refugee women exercising agency not in adapting to their workplace or coping with uncertain legal status through work but by refusing to identify with the stigmatised work they perform. They do not rebuild their sense of self through their work but instead through the agency of silence that allows them to refuse the recognition of themselves as domestic workers. This study expands that literature by introducing a form of agency through which female refugees in the Global South rebuild their sense of an honourable self. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship on Muslim women (Jamjoom and Mills, 2023; Nazzal et al., 2024) and advances feminist refugee studies within MOS.

The feminist perspective developed in this study demonstrates that refugee women's agency is shaped through desires, sentiments and sensibilities embedded in their ethical traditions and, more specifically, from the desire to reconstruct an honourable Muslim female self, achieved not through their paid work, which brings dishonour, but through the agency of silence. This honourable post-war self contrasts with Western feminist ideas of liberation through paid employment (e.g. Kessler-Harris, 2003). Honour for these women is achieved through adherence to Syrian tradition in which the honourable housewife is valorised. That is, to interpret these women's desires to be housewives as a capitulation to patriarchal norms of male domination would be an imposition from other discursive traditions. These sisters do not view their relationships with male relatives as ones of dominance and control, but find agency within them (Mahmood, 2005) via the norms and language of honour (Mahmood, 2009), which emerge from power structures that seem to ensure subordination but 'exceed the power by which [agency] is enabled' (Butler, 1997: 15). The silence enacted by these refugee women is not, therefore, a sign of passivity or docility but a modality of agency that enables a mode of being one strives to achieve as a refugee.

It is important to account for the material conditions and interlocking power structures of war, displacement and refugee status that shape female refugee agency. Forced into roles defined by norms as 'dirty work', these sisters do not accept the negative identities thus imposed; instead, they find agency within the traditions that honour women's roles as mothers and housewives. They endure appalling housing conditions without basic amenities but refuse to be passive subjects of subordination and become active agents striving to lead honourable, dignified lives with their children. Their capacity for agency does not derive from acts of resistance to patriarchy but in rejection of the stigmatised worker identity imposed by exile and precarity. This perspective transcends binary frameworks, such as 'obedience versus rebellion' or 'compliance versus resistance' (Mahmood, 2005: 180), that reduce agency to mere resistance (Collinson, 2000; Mumby, 2005). Rather, this study suggests that female refugee agency in the Global South must be understood within the terms of women's ethical traditions and material conditions, that is, 'within the grammar of concepts within which it resides' (Mahmood, 2005: 34).

The study's second contribution is to advance scholarship on organisational silence (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Fernando and Prasad, 2019) by developing the theory of silence as an agentive act. In this study, refugee women's silence is shown to act as a modality of agency in the reconstitution of the self (Cabantous et al., 2016; Harding et al., 2017), and is not an 'antithesis of voice' (e.g. Pinder and Harlos, 2001), a hindrance to organisational change or a 'passive act' (e.g. Morrison, 2011). Neither is it a result of managerial control or of organisational structures that enforce silence (Donaghey et al., 2011), nor an 'absence of voice' or hesitancy in speaking about organisational (dys)function (Szkudlarek and Alvesson, 2024: 305). This theory of the agency of silence resonates with critical literature that highlights, for example, the power dynamics inherent in silence (Brown and Coupland, 2005; Fernando and Prasad, 2019), wherein silence is described as 'purposeful' (Rauch and Ansari, 2025). This study advances this literature by demonstrating how silence is agentive and facilitates the reconstitution of a desired, honourable post-war self. Silence, for these sisters, is constitutive of personhood and

‘being and acting’ within the ‘limits and the possibility of what is sayable, doable, and recognisable as a comprehensible event in all its manifest forms’ (Mahmood: 2005: 115). I show that silence has the constitutive power to shape (honourable) identities, form subjects and rebuild lives of dignity.

The theory of the agency of silence emphasises that silence is performative: it has constitutive powers in rebuilding the sense of self destroyed by war and exile. By suppressing language, barring words that signify a tainted identity from leaving their mouths or entering their ears, and by preventing, through clever tactics, the hearing of articulations such as ‘you are a cleaner’, these sisters can assert, ‘I am not a domestic worker’. Dana’s prolonged refusal to speak about her work, and Farah’s consistent renaming of the stigmatised connotations of domestic work with the word ‘help’ or gestures of ‘appreciation’, illustrate how forms of silence become virtuous performative acts aimed at enacting the honourable self (Mahmood, 2005). That is, through repeated practices of silence, they engage in the process of honourable ‘self-making’ (Butler, 2021) and establish new constitutive terms that allow for more livable and dignifiable ways of being as refugees. Here, silence is not a discursive rationalisation intended to resolve a predicament or respond to a temporary situation, it is an embodied act with performative power to enact the self. What might appear to MOS scholars as a ‘negative’ (Stouten et al., 2019) or control-driven (Donaghey et al., 2011) act thus attains an agentive meaning: silence is agentive; it enables the reconstitution of the honourable self.

The theory of the agency of silence argues that it arises from practices of refusal. The refusal of these sisters to construct themselves as domestic workers stems from their ethical tradition, in which cleaning work is doubly stigmatised. The honourable past in which these women are rooted governs who they are, to what they are passionately attached and on what they are dependent: without honour, there is no ‘I’, and without the agency of silence, this ‘I’ cannot be realised, re-established or restored. The refusal of the ‘domestic worker’ identity enables the subject to pronounce ‘I am honourable’, which, as Mahmood (2005) indicates, is a performative, and constitutive, utterance shaped by the Syrian Islamic tradition. The agency of silence forecloses the risk of becoming ‘something else’ or, in Nora’s account, ‘not a good woman’: the dangerous, undesirable self of ‘the cleaner’. Silence cultivates, nurtures and strengthens the desire of not-becoming: ‘I refuse to be a domestic worker’. Silence can take a variety of forms, as I have illustrated here, each eradicating domestic work from women’s language. By enabling these women to avoid naming or acknowledging their work, it renders their bodily acts unsignifiable. It eliminates dishonourable language and reinforces honourable language, creating a new grammar from which agency arises (Mahmood, 2005). Here, silence’s performativity serves to constitute the honourable self (Butler, 2021: 44). Silence is thus the modality of agency that enables these sisters to situate themselves at the core of their tradition while ostensibly transgressing norms that would bar them from that place. Silence, often framed as a lack of voice (Morrison, 2011; Pinder and Harlos, 2001), should instead be understood as a productive, agentive refusal: a constitutive act that establishes subjects.

The theory of the agency of silence extends Mahmood’s (2001/2005) analysis of embodied modalities of agency. Mahmood’s work highlights how emotions and bodily gestures – such as *ṣabr* (patience) and *al-ḥayā* (shyness, diffidence, modesty) – are agentive performative acts that constitute the self. These should not be interpreted as

signs of passivity or compliance with what Western feminists may characterise as patriarchal norms; instead, Mahmood argues, they should be understood as virtues that infuse one's life and enable a specific kind of being and personhood. This study expands Mahmood's (2001, 2005) work by arguing that silence is a modality of agency enabling the reconstitution of the honourable post-war self.

Conclusion

This study highlights the agency of Syrian refugee women who have fled war and found employment in domestic work in Turkey, work that both stigmatises them and perpetuates their trauma. In showing how they have enacted agentive practices of silence to reconstitute themselves within the terms of the honourable subject to which they are passionately attached, I develop the understanding of the agency of female refugees living in the backstreets of cities in the Global South, and how they rebuild shattered selves. I must, nevertheless, acknowledge that when it comes to understanding the trauma and complexity of their lives, this study is merely an 'attempt' that can offer only 'partial truths' and remains 'incomplete' (Clifford and Marcus, 2023). Furthermore, tradition is not fixed and static, but is shaped over time via discourses that establish their authority and truth within historical moments (Mahmood, 2005). Further research should explore how these women's attitudes toward work evolve in the future, what additional coping strategies they develop, and how they continue to experience the highly precarious conditions of refugee life and labour in the Global South.

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Notes

- 1 Syrians are recognised as 'guests under temporary protection' by the Republic of Turkey (see <https://help.unhcr.org/turkiye/information-for-syrians/temporary-protection-in-turkey/>). In this paper, rather than using this legal definition, I refer to Syrians as 'refugees', appealing to a common understanding of the term.

- 2 The term *ayb* (عيب) encompasses the meanings of ‘shame’, ‘disgrace’ and ‘dishonour’. In this study, the sisters specifically used it to signify ‘shame’ and ‘shameful’, particularly in the context of socially inappropriate behaviour and deviation from cultural norms.

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