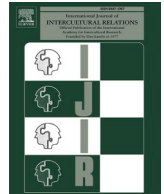




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Marriage economics, bargaining and strategic agency: Egyptian-Syrian intermarriage practices in the context of displacement

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ABSTRACT

Based on **forty-eight qualitative interviews** with Syrian refugee women and their families, this study explores the dynamics of Syrian-Egyptian marriages formed after displacement. **Grounded** in acculturation, marriage economics, and social exchange theories, **I ask:** what role is played by both cultural customs and displacement in dictating the Egyptian-(displaced)Syrian intermarriage trajectories and power dynamics in these unions? And how did Syrian women and Egyptian men leverage cultural differences to maximize their own benefits? The **results** outline how *wrfi* (customary) marriage and marriage economic traditions differ between these two often homogenized (and continuously Orientalized) cultures, impacting the marital relationship's nature, bargaining power and success. Beyond the passive exploitation narrative that hounds these highly stigmatized arrangements, the **analysis** illuminates how these marriages are often a result of immediate utilitarian and financial intersecting interests between the men and the women, they still carry long-term effects influencing the spousal balance of power. Nonetheless, some Syrian women leveraged cultural differences to maximize their gains and mitigate the implications of displacement and uprooting demonstrating a strategic and dialogical acculturation. The study **concludes** by highlighting the impact of displacement on marriage dynamics, shedding light on financial and power imbalances while highlighting how social and moral factors such as family support and socioeconomic factors influence the marriage dynamic. **Contribution:** The study sheds light on inter-Arab marriages in displacement contexts and broadens understanding within the larger spectrum of Arab marital dynamics, stimulating nuanced conversations about the sociology of marriage and family in the Arab world.

Introduction

Marriage has played a unique role in shaping the migration and displacement experience and has been regarded as a strategic and creative option for refugee and migrant women. Many terms have been used to describe marriage migration: cross-border marriage migration (Williams, 2010) or international marriage (Lin & Ma, 2008), cross-cultural marriage (Wise & Velayutham, 2008) or mixed marriage (Rodríguez-García, 2006). This body of literature assumes a cultural, religious, social or ethnic difference between the spouses. With little to no research in this area,¹ I focus in this paper on the intermarriage practice between two seemingly homogeneous

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¹ see few exceptions such as Assaad & Krafft (2014).

(and often Orientalized) groups due to their religious and linguistic proximity: Sunni Syrian women and Egyptian men who married after the Syrian influx to Egypt after the Syrian civil war beginning 2012.

Marriage as a coping strategy amid vulnerability is not unique to Syrian women. Similar practices have surfaced post-tsunami in Sri Lanka (Hyndman, 2008), across the North Korea–China border (Kim, 2014), and among young Rohingya women in Bangladesh (Beech, 2020). Nevertheless, Middle Eastern men marrying Syrian refugee women have faced severe scrutiny, often termed exploitative (Bayoumi, 2013; Fajry, 2012; Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2013; Hassan, 2015; Geha, 2013; Barkan, 2012). These unions have been likened to forced marriage and other forms of coercion and gender-based violence, largely linked to the precarious status of refugee women (Youssef & Ismail, 2013; Bartels et al., 2018; Acland & Gercama, 2018; Karakaş, 2018).

While this inquiry is Egyptian-focused, such marriages among Syrian refugees are observable in other regional countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia (Bayoumi, 2013; Fajry, 2012). Facilitated by various channels—marriage brokers, social media, and religious groups (Hassan, 2015; Geha, 2013; Barkan, 2012)—this phenomenon has garnered significant media and advocacy attention (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2013; Natour, 2016). Although the exact scale is not definitive, reports by human rights organizations, nonprofits, and the media have highlighted and condemned these arrangements. For example, in 2013, the National Council for Women Protection in Egypt reported approximately 12,000 marriages between Syrian women and Egyptian men under such arrangements (Natour, 2016).

Demonstrating the different cultural and economic differences between what was often dubbed by the respondents as the “Egyptian way” and the “Syrian way” of marriage, in this paper, I focus on the intercultural negotiations and tensions in a Syrian-Egyptian marriage, within the context of displacement, that *precedes* the marriage and trace how they influence the trajectory, success and power dynamic of the union. Aware of passive exploitation narratives, that attach the motives of such unions to portrayals of “Syrian refugees [as] cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry” (Youssef & Ismail, 2013) to the Egyptian social imaginary, I trace how some Syrian women leveraged cultural differences to maximize their gains and mitigate the implications of displacement and uprooting.

The two overarching questions of this paper are: How do different cultural customs within Egyptian-(displaced)Syrian marriages play a role in dictating the trajectories and power dynamics of these unions? And how did both Syrian women and Egyptian men leverage cultural differences to maximize their benefits? To entertain these questions, I explore how the tradition of marriage (i.e., Egyptian v. Syrian) sets the tone in many cases for the nature of the marital relationship and the success of the marriage. I particularly touch on the question of whether the stereotypically lower cost and easier logistics of marriage to a Syrian woman, who is also uprooted, were factors contributing to some Egyptian men pursuing Syrian refugee wives. Namely, I investigate two factors: *urfi* (customary) marriage and marriage economics traditions, both of which were determined strikingly different between the two cultures.

Building on research and theories of acculturation, marriage economics, and social exchange, this study traces the cultural leveraging, negotiations and compromise between two seemingly homogeneous marriage cultures. It positions intercultural marriage between Egyptian men and Syrian Refugee women to address a major gap in the literature in two main areas: first, understanding intercultural marriage negotiations and power dynamics in contexts of displacement and second, starting the conversation about inter-Arab marriage dynamics and negotiations revealing the vast array of subcultural interpretations and cultural practices among Arabs destabilizing the notion of a homogenous Arab or culture and inviting a more nuanced conversation about the sociology of marriage and family in the region.

Methodology

Design

The fieldwork for this study was carried out in the summer of 2017 in the greater Cairo area and Alexandria, Egypt, where the highest number of Syrian refugees in Egypt reside. The design of this study involved qualitative in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations to understand the lived experiences the interlocutors. Participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The interviews were all conducted in Arabic in person and in a private place in the participants’ residence and ranged between 60–120 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Arabic. Coding, themes, and analysis were conducted using the Arabic text to remain fidel to mother tongue expressions and cultural references. Quotes selected to be included in reporting were translated to English at the final stage where the author opted to keep some keywords in their original Arabic language and expand on their often-packed meanings in the analysis.

Sampling and recruitment

The sample consisted of thirty Sunni Syrian Muslim women either married or recently divorced from Egyptian men, along with nine Egyptian husbands and seven mothers of these women, all of whom currently reside in Egypt and were married post-displacement. The majority of the women (18) were aged 30–45, with nine aged 18–29, and five aged 46–60. Before displacement, 12 were divorced or separated, five were widows, and 13 had never been married. Most (25) resided in middle to low-income neighborhoods, while only five lived in affluent areas. Initially, a convenience sampling method was used, which evolved to incorporate elements of purposive snowballing sampling to include upper-middle and upper-class women, who were initially underrepresented. The sample only included Sunni participants due to the predominance of Sunni Muslims in Egypt and among the Syrian population in Egypt. Various recruitment methods were employed, including personal connections, snowball sampling, social media, and persistent outreach, which

helped in reaching a diverse group of participants across different socio-economic levels, age groups, and marital statuses.

Analysis and positionality

The analysis of the data was guided by narrative analysis and discourse analysis techniques to uncover implicit and explicit themes within the participants' accounts. This approach helped explore how participants experience their social context, understand their subjectivity and agency, and how these are influenced by gender relations and discursive practices. I concentrate on life course processes, described by Bischooping & Gazso as "stories that illustrate lives as they unfold and change, through planned and unexpected role transitions or turning points" (2016, p. 19). I employ strategies to explore how narrators position themselves and their decisions relative to others in their stories. These strategies also help identify key events that the respondents view as transitional or pivotal, examining how they interpret these moments and relate them to their cultural contexts (Bischooping & Gazso, 2016). The researcher's positionality as an Egyptian Muslim woman provided cultural fluency, aiding in deeper engagement with the participants and adding a layer of authenticity and relatability to the interactions. However, it also posed challenges in maintaining objectivity, necessitating constant reflexivity to mitigate bias and maintain the integrity of the data interpretation.

Theoretical grounding

Several theories can help us understand the motivations and dynamics of intercultural marriages. For example, game theory can model strategic interactions and decision-making processes within marriages, showing how partners negotiate and sometimes compete over resources and decisions (Udry, 1996). Marriage squeeze theory explains demographic imbalances affecting marriage markets, particularly how gender imbalances influence marital choices and competition (Angrist, 2002). Assortative mating provides insights into the selection processes based on socioeconomic, physical, or cultural traits, highlighting patterns of similarity within couples (Becker, 1973). However, two central issues stigmatize marriages between Egyptian men and Syrian displaced women: assumptions that these unions are exploitative, with men taking advantage of refugee women, and that they occur within a homogeneous culture requiring no adaptation or cultural compromise. Three theoretical frameworks—acculturation, marriage economics, and social exchange theory—help unpack and question these assumptions by emphasizing the strategic, transactional, and agentive aspects that characterize the initiation and evolution of these unions, particularly from the perspective of refugee women.

Becker's pioneering work on marriage economics views marriage as a form of human capital investment, identifying the economic and utilitarian factors influencing marriage decisions. Each party (consciously or subconsciously) weighs potential benefits against possible costs (Becker, 1973; Becker, 1974). This framework suggests that marriages are formed when the perceived benefits, which can be material (financial security), social (status enhancement), emotional (companionship), or spiritual (fulfillment of cultural or religious norms), outweigh the costs associated with marriage (e.g. marrying outside their culture or in some Syrian women's cases "marrying down"). An economic approach to marriage, thus, does not exclude emotions and morality though might require some complementing from biological, romantic, ethical, and religious perspectives (Grossbard, 1978) to help us widen the scope and meaning of "cost" and "benefit" that includes such subtle and intertwining aspects.

Social exchange theory thus complements and extends the insights of marriage economics by pointing out those minute and intangible considerations focusing on the detailed interpersonal dynamics and reciprocal nature of exchanges within the marriage (Cook et al., 2013). Within exchange theory, economic exchanges tend to be quid pro quo and more active monitoring, whereas social exchange tends to emphasize trust and flexibility and thus is more useful for this study given the social and emotional gains involved (Rosenfeld, 2005). Social exchange highlights that relationships are *sustained* based on the perceived balance of rewards and costs and the power dynamics that emerge from these exchanges. Trust and commitment are crucial for long-term stability and satisfaction within marriages (Cook & Emerson, 1978). The theory also explores how resource inequalities might impact relationship dynamics, such as when one partner has significantly more economic resources or social capital than the other, deeming some relationships a failure.

Acculturation involves changes that occur when different cultural groups interact continuously, leading to alterations in the cultural norms of one or both groups (Schumann et al., 2020; Wijerathna & Hewapathirana, 2022). Kim (1978) proposes a communication approach where acculturation entails cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral adaptation to the new culture, rather than merely adopting the values of a new society. In the context of marriage and displacement, acculturation theory offers a nuanced understanding of cultural adjustments and identity negotiations within intercultural marriage (Berry, 1992; Kim, 1978). While Berry (2017) describes four acculturation strategies—separation, assimilation, marginalization, and integration—I take the position that acculturation should be seen as a dialogical, relational, and strategic process (Howarth et al., 2014; Bhatia, 2002). As Bhatia (2002) explains: "The formation of immigrant identities in diasporic communities involves a constant process of negotiation, intervention, and mediation that is shaped by issues of race, gender, sexuality and power" (p. 59). This perspective views acculturation not just as a reactive adaptation but as a strategic process where individuals from different backgrounds consciously choose how much to integrate into the host culture while preserving aspects of their native culture.

By weaving together these complementary theoretical frameworks, this study aims to decode the intricate dance of initiation, negotiations, leveraging, and adaptation within Arab intercultural marriages, shedding light on the complexity and richness inherent in the union of seemingly homogenous cultures. This integration allows for a thorough exploration of why these marriages occur, how they are sustained or collapse, how power dynamics are negotiated, and how cultural identities are managed—often agentively.

Marriage practices in Syrian and Egyptian cultures: tensions and complementarities

The marriage crisis in Egypt

In Egyptian and Arab societies, marriage stands as a critical societal landmark, influencing social roles, gender norms, and the distribution of wealth (Hoodfar, 1998; Rashad et al., 2005). It is pivotal in defining adulthood, gender identities, and social acceptance (Clark-Kazak, 2013). This institution distinctly marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood, encompassing deeply ingrained gender roles and solidifying one's societal status (Hoodfar, 1998). Additionally, it plays a substantial role in wealth transmission, often representing the "largest intergenerational transfer of wealth [...] for most people" (Hasso, 2011). However, societal changes driven by urbanization, education, and employment shifts have challenged traditional norms. As education levels rise and job sectors evolve, particularly in urban settings, women increasingly join the workforce, reshaping societal expectations and altering conventional gender roles (Rashad et al., 2005).

This shift, coupled with rising costs, has contributed to what is termed the "marriage crisis" in Egypt (Hasso, 2011). Economic factors such as the escalating expenses associated with marriage, reduced state support, and an increased focus on materialism have all led to a delay in the age of marriage since the late 1970s (Rashad et al., 2005). Notably, these perspectives predominantly represent the experiences of the middle class, where the ability to meet financial demands determines the marriage narrative. That is, the wealthier classes can meet marriage demands and financial requirements, and the poorer classes can compromise on unrealistic financial demands (Kholoussy, 2010). This leaves the crisis at its starkest among the middle class, particularly the urban middle class, heavily concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria: the locus of the fieldwork of this study.

Furthermore, broader socio-demographic and ideological forces like globalization, individualism, and urbanization have reshaped societal values and encouraged alternatives to traditional marriage (Hasso, 2011; Botman, 1999; Singerman, 2007, 2008; Rashad et al., 2005). These changes reward individual aspirations, often at the expense of traditional family structures. They have also led to emerging non-traditional forms of marriage, signaling a response to economic and cultural obstacles surrounding conventional marital practices (Hasso, 2011).

Role of marriage economics and bargaining on spousal power dynamics in Egypt

In Egypt, like many Muslim-majority countries, marriage heavily intertwines with religion, law, customs, and social norms, dictating gender roles and responsibilities. Men typically shoulder the financial burden, extending beyond the nuclear family to include parents and sometimes relatives (Hoodfar, 1998; Kholoussy, 2010). While marriage costs are shared, grooms and their families bear the major expense, covering about three-quarters (Singerman, 2008; Kholoussy, 2010; Salem, 2018). Egyptian women and families seek maximum benefit before marriage, with *mahr* (bridewealth) symbolizing financial security (Hoodfar, 1998). *Mahr*'s significance varies across social classes and regions. In urban middle-class marriages, it serves as a protective measure (Hoodfar, 1998).

Understanding *mahr*'s role is crucial for comprehending its implications in marriages, especially concerning divorce (Hoodfar, 1998). Marriage costs in Egypt often equate to years of earnings, with matrimonial exchanges absorbing significant portions of income (Salem, 2018; Singerman, 2008). Policymakers and religious figures stress the need to alleviate the economic crisis of marriage, yet reducing financial demands might oversimplify complex social concerns (Salem, 2018; Singerman, 2008). In that sense, while reducing the economic demands of marriage negotiations might alleviate the problems associated with the expense of marriage, in the view of the bride's family, it would contribute to the disempowerment of the woman in the household.

Salem (2018) observed that a larger *mahr* correlates with increased participation of husbands in household chores, indicating a relationship between *mahr* size and household dynamics (p. 2619). Her research on matrimonial transactions in Egypt highlights that when the bride and her family cover a portion of the marriage cost, it signifies support and compensates for disparities between the spouses (Salem, 2018, p. 2615). An expensive *mahr* reflects the groom's regard for the bride, while a low-value dower signals the bride's disadvantaged position (Salem, 2018, p. 2620).

Another element that plays an important role in balancing the power relation between the spouses is a unique institution, practiced exclusively in Egypt: the marriage inventory or the *ayma* (literally "the list"). Through this system, "all the household goods purchased by the bride and groom, in addition to the bride's gold and the deferred dower [*mu'akhar*], are listed in the marriage inventory, along with an inflated estimate of their monetary value" (Salem, 2018, p. 2623). This additional security precaution allows the wife to claim these items or the equivalent sum of money from the husband or his family, especially in scenarios such as an abusive relationship, unilateral divorce by the husband, a second wife, or the death of the husband. Thus, the economic aspect of marriage in Egypt plays a major role in the marriage's success, not simply to make it (un)feasible financially but to set the tone for the power dynamics in the marriage (Singerman, 2008; Salem, 2018). Respondents, however, including men, women, and families, revealed that this system pushed some middle-class men toward Syrian women, as Syrians do not practice the *ayma* system, contrasting with Egyptian marital customs.

Urfi marriage in Egyptian and Syrian cultures

Amidst the marriage crisis in Egypt, as financial, economic, and logistical challenges grow, Egyptian youth increasingly seek alternative solutions to traditional forms of marriage such as *urfi* marriage, marriage to foreigners, and consanguinity. I focus in this study on the first two as they are more pertinent to this case study. Marrying non-Egyptians has become an increasingly appealing option, mainly for Egyptian men, who face fewer legal and social mobility restrictions than Egyptian women. Singerman (2007)

highlights this trend as a cost-effective alternative, providing financial gains and resource access. The unions span Saudis with Indonesians, Moroccans with the French, and Egyptians with Americans or Palestininas, offering various advantages such as visa facilitation and citizenship perks (p. 31). This growing practice reflects diverse incentives beyond just marital relationships.

Urfi (customary) marriage refers to a type of common-law marriage that is limited to the religious component and is unregistered legally. It is often kept private, including—or rather especially—keeping it a secret from the couple's parents or first wife if applicable. *Urfi* marriage is more common among urban than rural youth, mainly among university students. It is seen to offer a solution to the financial and logistical obstacles created by traditional marriage while giving sexual relations more legitimacy (Rashad et al., 2005; Hasso, 2011).

It is pertinent here to distinguish between the meaning and social implications of customary marriage in Egypt and other countries in the Arab world, such as Tunisia and Syria (Rashad et al., 2005). In the latter countries, customary marriage is referred to as *shar'e* marriage or lawful marriage, the name deriving from its compliance with Islamic *sharia*. It is common for such marriage to take place with the knowledge of both families and friends, but without formally informing the state institutions for a variety of reasons: for instance, in secular Tunisia, polygamy is illegal incentivizing options that bypass formal civil channels. In Syria, customary marriage (dubbed *Shar'ei* or Islamically-compliant marriage) receives societal approval but is often used to substitute the engagement stage, i.e., often without the commencement of the marriage (Rashad et al., 2005; Hasso, 2011). As communicated to me by more than one respondent, it often substitutes the engagement step so that the bride and groom are allowed more time in private and without the bride wearing her *hijab* (hair covering) if that is the case.

In striking contrast, in urban Egypt, *urfi* marriage has a less favorable reputation and has been condemned by social and religious figures. As mentioned, it is hard to obtain accurate statistics to describe the extent of this practice which often has more negative consequences for women. Still, it is gaining more popularity among the youth, especially university students:

The secrecy surrounding urfi marriages puts young women at a particular disadvantage because these women are not able to negotiate the terms of their marriage—a role usually played by families in conventional marriages [...] But in 1998, according to one estimate, there were nearly 10,000 cases of contested paternity in Egyptian courts due to urfi marriages. It is also not uncommon for men entering into urfi marriages to later deny these marriages, leaving their wives in legal limbo and socially stigmatized (Rashad et al., 2005, p. 7).

Urfi marriage thus offers a quasi-legitimate route to sexual relations, even if not socially approved, and decreases the number of unmarried women, a label lined by a suffocating social stigma. Combined with the marriage crisis and the logistical and financial hurdles among urban middle-class Egyptian families, in the results I trace how both Egyptian men and Syrian women found and negotiated complementarities and tensions in their different cultural marriage practices.

Results

Motivations and aligning benefits

During the fieldwork, most women respondents stated that shortly after arriving in Egypt, and regardless of their marital status (divorced, widowed, single mother, or never been married), they had multiple marriage proposals from Egyptian men from different social classes. Informants characterized many of these marriages as: (1) *Quick*, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal; (2) *Polygamous*, where the husband already has a wife and is seeking a second wife; and (3) *Customary* or *urfi*, marriages that are limited to the religious ceremony and hence not registered with the state through official paperwork. When I asked the respondents to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men sought Syrian brides, almost all of them portrayed the same image of the Syrian woman's unique physical beauty and embodiment of desirable femininity, a strong sense of self-care, and a reputation for being good housewives. Egyptian husbands on the other hand raised another salient issue: the financial burden of marrying an Egyptian woman, especially with the increasing material and financial demands and conditions from the bride's family that would likely follow a middle-class Egyptian traditional marriage. Some men said that with limited financial resources, they had a better chance of finding a 'higher quality' partner, in terms of social class and intellectual qualities since Syrian refugees would have fewer options to choose from compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

On the other hand, Syrian women marrying Egyptians often view marriage as a multifaceted survival tool encompassing legal, economic, social, moral, and emotional dimensions. Legally, marriage can offer stability in the unpredictable Egyptian political landscape, providing legal residency status for themselves and their children, as illustrated by Galaa's marriage convenience under a tourist visa. Economically, many Syrian women, particularly single mothers, see marriage as a financial support system. For instance, Nisreen sought marriage to alleviate the burden of supporting herself and her children, highlighting marriage as an economic necessity.

Marriage also offered the women companionship and a sense of belonging, addressing the isolation and social and emotional void caused by displacement. Naziha's story reflects this, as she sought a partner to share life's burdens and provide emotional support:

Look, I didn't want to get married, but I will tell you the events that showed me later (that it was the right choice). Maybe I wanted a man to carry the burden of my apartment rent. Or a man to carry my burden and my young daughter's responsibility. I want a man to tell him, "Life has been so hard on me"

The concepts of '*sanad*' (support) and '*sutra*' (protection) mentioned were central to the motivation of many "uprooted" women signifying the social capital (Bourdieu 1979) that marriage offers them, anchoring them in new societal roles and helping them navigate their precarious situations. These marriages, however, while sometimes strategically motivated, often evolve into genuine

bonds formed out of daily interactions and complementary preferences.

Urfi marriage and strategic agency

One of the elements that cause significant criticism of seeking a Syrian bride in Egypt is that many of these marriages were reported to be *urfi* and/or polygamous. Many of the respondents involved in an *urfi* or a polygamous marriage arrangement challenged the narrative which perpetuates perceptions of this type of marriage as exploitative. As we can see above, by Egyptian standards, *urfi* marriage automatically implies an exploitative relationship often against the woman, since, for example, it is harder in unregistered marriages to prove marital and legal rights and even register children. However, many of the respondents defended *urfi* marriage by either equating it culturally with *shar'e* (Islamically-lawful) marriage or justifying why *urfi* made the most sense in their situation. For instance, Asmaa explained:

I: So, your marriage was urfi.

R: You call it here urfi, but it's like a regular paper [contract]. In Syria, this same paper can be registered in court.

I: So, there were witnesses and an announcement of the marriage.

R: Verbally only, like in the Prophet's times with words. But you call it here urfi.

In practice, *urfi* marriage eased the prospect of a second, more discreet marriage, valuable in a society favoring monogamy (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). One respondent, Marwa, faced resistance when her husband's first wife confronted her about the secrecy: "Didn't you consider me? What would happen to me when my husband marries a second wife?" Marwa's response reflected her priorities and challenges: "No, to be honest, I didn't consider you, I have enough on my plate." *Urfi* marriages, for some thus, offered social and economic benefits without the stigma and conflicts associated with being a second wife (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2003). Paradoxically then, maintaining a "precarious" status (since *urfi* marriage is not registered and has few legal consequences) granted more stability in their social circle, providing a nuanced perspective on their reframing of marriage and their ways of navigating societal expectations and unwanted confrontations that are secondary to their survival mode.

Choosing between two traditions: the cost of marriage in the Syrian v. the Egyptian way

Most of the respondents married in what they termed "the Syrian way," as opposed to "the Egyptian way." They defended this choice with a mix of cultural and pragmatic reasons, explaining for instance the belief that a man should "work hard" to find a suitable wife. They perceived any involuntary contributions from a bride's side or her family as a direct humiliation to a man and his masculinity. Additionally, they stressed that because they lost most of their financial resources after arriving in Egypt, they could not afford to marry "the Egyptian way." One of the respondents, Latifa, who is a Palestinian-Syrian, explained this rationale to her suitor and his mediator as follows:

I cannot afford household and gihaz (furniture) expenses like Egyptian women. I told them I am not Egyptian. Palestinian women do not contribute anything. They pay her money for marriage because our men work from a very early age, so they do not take anything from the woman. They consider the woman's contribution as a sadaqa (charity), and he cannot accept sadaqa because he is a man and can afford it. This is why I am astonished by how Egyptian women and men accept it on themselves and for their women to contribute to the marriage. This is Sadaqa.

A few of the respondents were half-joking when they said they would marry their daughters the Syrian way and their sons the Egyptian way because it makes the most financial sense for them. They stressed the importance of keeping their demands reasonable, and in fact, many spoke of how they are not supposed to have a say in what the groom offers for *mahr* since it is a gift. They do not view it from the balance of power perspective that Egyptian families perceive.

On the other hand, some of the respondents ended up marrying "the Egyptian way", or a modified version of it. Sometimes this was because the Syrian women "went with the flow" of their new cultural context as their husbands followed the familiar tradition. Other times Syrian women had to consciously adapt to "the Egyptian way" when their prospective husbands could not afford a significant *mahr* (bridewealth) and *shabka* (jewelry). They were compensated by having the husband write the rest of the *mahr* in the form of an *ayma* (the inventory list), which as mentioned is a common practice in Egypt.

For a third group, acculturation was more intentional where adapting to marriage arrangements and embracing the "the Egyptian way" was the bride or her family's decision. They opted to split the cost of marriage for two main reasons: first, they could afford to contribute, and second, they wanted to respect the Egyptian traditions. For Zeina (mid-20 s) and her family, it was a matter of dignity:

I: And why did you choose the Egyptian way and the ayma system?

R: My dad wanted to respect the traditions of the country we are in. Second of all, and most importantly, we are not the kind of family that would take advantage of a man even if we justify it by tradition. I started hearing that many Syrians married their daughters and receives 10 thousand (EGP)... are you selling her? My dad has dignity, and he said no [...] Mahr and shabka are the groom's responsibility, and the rest was divided like the customs here.

Zeina's rationale corresponds with Salem's (2018) conclusions, mentioned earlier, about the power of financial contribution in showing family support to the bride.

For some husbands on the other hand, marriage to a Syrian woman was seen as an economic solution to making an affordable marriage and finding a suitable wife. This was especially relevant to working-class Egyptian men or those who have a relatively good

education level but are still struggling financially. During interviews with both men and women, it was insinuated that “the Egyptian way” would make it impossible for men “who are not millionaires” to marry. Thus, the Syrian woman “gave them an alternative,” as Galaa, one of the mature Syrian women respondents, mentioned. This alternative was not exclusively related to stereotypical beliefs that Syrian women are more feminine and better housewives than their Egyptian counterparts, but also because Syrian families are more lenient about financial terms and marriage conditions, as demonstrated in the previous section. Not surprisingly, such lenience has increased due to displacement.

On the other hand, Mahmoud and Ghena, who were pregnant with their first during the interview, were both happily married well-to-do couple. Mahmoud expressed criticism of “the Egyptian way” since it offers only a facade of protection to women. He explained that a groom could agree to a *mahr* (bridewealth) and an expensive *mo'akhar* (the deferred part of the *mahr*) which is typically used to protect against arbitrary divorce, only to “turn his wife’s life into hell” if he cannot divorce her because he cannot pay. He logically concludes that she would then want a divorce even if it meant giving up that *mo'akhar*. Similarly, although a groom could get his bride a very expensive *shabka* (jewelry gift), he can sell it after marriage:

We initially agreed to split it (the marriage expenses) like the Egyptian way, and that she will contribute with me. Then, I spoke to her mom, and I started appreciating their way. Her mother told me that I could contribute what I want and what I can to the household. She told me, “This is your house, you arrange it however you prefer. If you want to buy new furniture or used furniture, it is up to you. But in Syria, our tradition is that the groom is responsible for everything”. I found that there were no obligations or conditions. I could afford more than what an Egyptian bride would afford, but it would be my choice, no obligations.

Thus, Mahmoud thinks “the Egyptian way” creates the illusion of women’s control and empowerment while still creating significant financial stress for grooms. He explained his appreciation of the Syrian way, not primarily for affordability, but for its logic that favors the husband contributing what he can leading, in his opinion, to genuine balance based on care not insurance money.

Ahmed, on the other hand, who was struggling financially, provided a more explicit cost-benefit approach to his rationale for why marrying a Syrian wife made financial, hence practical, sense to him. He had been married twice before, worked abroad, and had an acceptable level of education. He had been married to his Syrian wife, Aisha a former school teacher, for more than two years at the time of our interview. They already have two children together, in addition to his two older boys from a previous marriage. For him, his wife is “a catch” that he appreciates but he also recognizes that he married her at a “discounted price.” He clarified that marrying an Egyptian woman with the same social and educational background, or as he puts it, a girl that is *bent nas* (a girl from a proper family, with a proper education) would have been impossible:

Do you want the truth since you are doing research? If I marry an Egyptian woman who is bent nas, she would cost me a lot. So, to find someone like my current wife but Egyptian would cost me a lot. But with a Syrian woman, you can find bent nas, and she costs you nothing [brief pause]. That is not what I meant! I meant it would not cost as much.

Ahmed’s situation meant he had some clear disadvantages both him and his wife were aware of. He has been divorced twice, has two boys, and it was a struggle for him to keep a job for long. While the affordability of marrying a high-quality wife mattered to him, his top priority was to find a wife who would accept his two children and treat them with kindness. In their separate confidential interviews, both he and his wife agreed that she was “out of his league” and that her refugee status had led her to settle for a less advantageous marriage than she might have attained had she remained in Syria. Aisha’s *mahr* was 2500 Egyptian pounds (equivalent to 140 USD at the time), but for her, the compromise was not about the amount of *mahr*, so much as settling for a divorced man with children for her first marriage. Ultimately, she did express affection for him and stated that her home is now Egypt, as it is where her family is.

Displacement implications on intercultural marriage

To many, the migration status and the social uprooting of some Syrian women significantly influenced power dynamics within their marriages. One impactful story highlighted the ease with which some husbands considered divorce, particularly after minor disagreements. Fatma, one of the interviewees and the youngest divorcee, recounted her abandonment following a disagreement with her husband. She faced extreme situations that reinforced narratives of exploitation and victimization. At 21, she spent three initial years in Egypt feeling bored until she met her ex-husband, initially impressed but wary of his controlling mother’s involvement. When she voiced concerns, her mother-in-law hinted that she could leave if uncomfortable. Fatma, hesitant to object due to fear of ending the engagement and returning to boredom, felt pressured by her mother-in-law’s expectation that since she was not contributing financially, the groom’s family had the final say in everything. Despite feeling upset, she grew fond of her fiancé, fearing any objection might break off the engagement. This fear dictated her silence:

R: He said I want her as is.

I: So, he agreed to your terms that you are not contributing financially to the marriage.

R: Yes, he just wants me with my suitcase.

I: Did you feel that this has affected the balance of power in your relationship?

R: Not initially, but for example, his mother said if you are not contributing, then we get to buy what we think is best for the house.

In reflecting on her divorce, she concluded that because she did not contribute to the marriage, she was viewed by her husband and his family as a charity case who should be grateful to be saved from displacement and therefore had no rights. Fatma felt used and cheated after the divorce. Her displacement and uprooting influenced her later bargaining power and potentially the marriage failure.

In Asmaa’s case, however, it was not the lack of her financial contribution that caused the problem; in fact, it was the large sum of

her *mahr* that did. Asmaa, who was in her early 40s during our interview, faced social ostracization from Syrian neighbors due to her failed *urfi* marriage with an Egyptian man. Marrying “the Syrian way” and the secret second-wife arrangement, initially promised financial security and company as she suffered from extreme loneliness after moving to Egypt and leaving her children with her first husband. After a few months, she described her husband’s rare and brief visits, as “lawful prostitution” ultimately feeling exploited and seeking a divorce, which her regretful ex-husband quickly agreed to, provided her family returned the \$15,000 *mahr*. The *muqaddam* (pre-marriage gift of \$10,000) and *mu’akhar* (deferred payment/gift of \$5000, often payable in case of divorce) became a contentious issue. As her family refused repayment, the ex-husband resorted to shaming tactics. He exposed intimate details of their marriage in Asmaa’s conservative neighborhood, pressuring her family by using scare tactics of deportation and highlighting the complex power dynamics intertwined with the migration status of the spouses.

Asmaa’s marriage and *mahr* (bridewealth), the equivalent of 200 thousand Egyptian pounds at the time, were by no means cheaper than an average urban middle-class Egyptian marriage. However, in contrast to Salem’s (2018) previously fitting conclusion—which did not account for factors such as intermarriage and displacement—regarding the correlation between the amount of *mahr* and power balance within a marriage, the *mahr* amount did not lead to more empowerment or respect for Asmaa. It was also certainly not a strong reason to keep the marriage intact.

Discussion

In regions like North Africa, where Egypt is located—unlike Levantine Syria—the marriage contract holds profound significance, influencing the economic and social arrangements among young individuals (Assaad & Krafft, 2014). This view that marriage outcomes result from a bargaining process between families, aligns with anthropological and economics-oriented literature, diverging from ‘modernization’ hypotheses (Hoodfar, 1998; Salem, 2018). This paper examines a distinct form of intercultural marriage within the context of displacement and among two seemingly homogenous cultures.

Egyptian men marrying Syrian refugee women was overshadowed by a lot of unease, particularly with the abundance of *urfi* (unregistered customary) marriages and the initially lower marriage costs among Syrian women and their families. From an economic utility perspective, the analysis reveals that, especially among lower-income groups, the presence of a Syrian wife opened a new market to the escalating financial expectations faced by Egyptian grooms. The absence of the Egyptian *ayma* system and the financial leniency of Syrian families, amplified by displacement, influence financially struggling Egyptian men to gravitate towards marrying Syrian refugees. Displacement shapes the bargaining power and outcomes nevertheless. While some Egyptian men benefit from the lower initial costs of Syrian marriage customs, allowing them to ‘marry up,’ Syrian women often find themselves ‘marrying down,’ as illustrated by the marriage of Ahmed and Aisha.

Moreover, displacement significantly alters traditional social structures and accountability, particularly in marriages between Egyptian men and Syrian refugee women. The economic dynamics of Egyptian marriages traditionally rely on a social structure—typically the bride’s family—to ensure the effectiveness of the monetary insurance. However, many Syrian women, having arrived without familial support, lack this social safety net, making them vulnerable to easier divorce initiated by their Egyptian husbands, especially when financially dependent. The power dynamics in these marriages are influenced by broader socio-economic contexts where Egyptian men, even when marrying ‘the Syrian way,’ still operate under the financial security logic of the ‘Egyptian way,’ for bargain and power balance leading to less financial and social consequences in case of divorce.

This shift is exemplified by the stories of Zeina and Asmaa. Zeina’s family’s insistence on marrying the Egyptian way ensured social accountability and reinforced her social capital, whereas Asmaa’s high *mahr* did not translate to increased power within her marriage due to the absence of family support symbolized in contributing to the marriage cost. These cases highlight how, despite economic factors, power dynamics are closely tied to social capital, structures, and accountability. That is, this loss of social capital and community networks diminishes the bargaining power of Syrian women, altering traditional marriage structures and impacting their status in these intercultural unions. In cases like Zeina’s, family involvement and support still play a crucial role in maintaining a balance of power, reflecting the traditional Egyptian emphasis on mutual financial contribution in marriage. This ongoing negotiation of marriage dynamics in the face of displacement showcases how deeply intertwined economic advantages are with cultural and social factors in shaping these intercultural marriages.

Marriage economics provides insight into the initial motivations for Egyptian-Syrian marriages by highlighting the impact of uprooting and the financial burdens of traditional marriages. These unions often emerge from the intersection of two significant crises: the economic pressures on Egyptian marriages and the vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees. This confluence creates a unique market dynamic where different needs and opportunities influence marital choices. Social exchange theory complements marriage economics in two ways. First, it helps us rethink the meaning and parameters of “cost” and “benefit” including moral and intangible factors, and second, it offers a nuanced portrayal, beyond the initial marriage decision, of why some of these marriages succeed while others did not, focusing on elements such as trust, resource balance, and the emotional and moral bonds that develop between partners (Emerson, 1972) but most importantly, how the husband perceived the bargaining power the wife has informed by the financial arrangements dictating the marriage.

However, the above does not tell the full story and dismisses the strategic agency of Syrian refugee women. This paper illuminates how post-displacement conditions have reshaped marriage markets and influenced marital strategies and strategic agency. Some Syrian women leveraged the stereotypical perceptions of Syrian femininity—often idealized in Egyptian society—to enhance their desirability and bargaining position. Many Syrian women have acquired enough cultural fluency to adeptly manage their cultural identities (e.g. highlighting Syrian desirable femininity stereotypes). This strategic presentation of self is a form of acculturation where women selectively adopt, resist, or emphasize certain cultural traits to optimize their circumstances in the face of displacement and

resettlement challenges. These dynamics show a nuanced spectrum of negotiation, where Syrian women leverage cultural and legal ambiguities to enhance their position, while Egyptian men navigate these marriages to maximize economic and social benefits, reflecting a broader reconfiguration of marital power dynamics in the face of cultural intersection and socio-economic upheaval. Furthermore, the precariousness associated with 'urfi' marriages paradoxically empowers these women by providing them flexibility and autonomy (to end the marriage with little legal and logistical consequences) in otherwise constrained circumstances.

It is also worth mentioning that the analysis revealed that Egyptian men's contact with the Syrian culture has had some acculturation effects, such as in Mahmoud and Ghena's case which enabled Mahmoud to see the flaws in the Egyptian marriage tradition in his opinion and opt for the Syrian tradition not because it was cheaper for him but because according to him it offers a true balance of power between spouses not based on financial bargain emphasizing the social (and moral) exchange aspects within marriage.

Forced displacement, nevertheless, acts as a double-edged sword, affording men the opportunity to settle for more while forcing women and their families to compromise for less, and sometimes acting as a liberating agent for some women from certain aspects of social stigma, such as secretive marriage or polygamy, or even re-marriage for some (Author, 2021), particularly after leaving their immediate communities. Finally, the analysis revealed how respondents interpreted marriages through a lens of cultural difference, highlighting the divergence in perceptions even within Arab Muslim Sunni cultures. The discussions here around marriage customs and underlying philosophies sought to epitomize these stark yet obscure differences, warranting further research in this area.

Conclusion

The rise of Syrian-Egyptian intermarriages poignantly reflects the intersection of two crises: the Egyptian marriage crisis and the Syrian refugee crisis. This paper delves into the complex interplay of tensions and complementarities that shape the dynamics of these intercultural unions in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict. It challenges the often presumed exploitative and homogeneous nature of these marriages, offering a nuanced analysis that intersects economic pressures, cultural practices, and individual agency.

Through a marriage economics lens, these marriages frequently represent strategic financial decisions driven by the socioeconomic statuses of the participants. Lower-income Egyptian men are drawn to the initially lower costs of Syrian marriage traditions and the willingness of some Syrian women and their families to "marry down" in exchange for legal, financial, and social security post-displacement. This economic utility, however, not only motivates the initial attraction but also sets the context for subsequent dynamics.

Social exchange theory illuminates how these marriages navigate a complex balance of costs and benefits that extend beyond financial aspects to include moral and emotional considerations. The lack of familial support for many Syrian women often shifts this balance, diminishing their bargaining power within the marriage and potentially setting the stage for exploitation. This is evident in the vulnerability of some women to expedited divorces facilitated by their diminished social capital post-displacement. However, some Syrian women utilize their cultural and social attributes to enhance their desirability and bargaining power, engaging in strategic acculturation. This selective and agentive adoption or resistance of cultural traits allows them to optimize their circumstances within a new cultural and economic landscape.

Together, marriage economic, social exchange and acculturation suggest that while economic and social pressures significantly initiate these marriages, individual agency and cultural interactions are crucial in determining their dynamics and outcomes. This multifaceted approach provides a deeper understanding of the adaptive strategies and challenges within Syrian-Egyptian marriages, highlighting the intricate ways in which economic factors, cultural differences, and personal choices converge.

Ethics Review statement

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, [anonmized] University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the [anonymized] Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. Approval number STU 2017 – 044.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT to assist with rephrasing, clarifying some dense sentences or ideas or

making them more succinct. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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