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Articulating Syrian women refugees' education in an age of uncertainty

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ABSTRACT

Political conflicts propelled a wave of refugees that are seen as a force that threatens the stability of the UK and Western Europe. It has left many refugees bewildered and vulnerable in a transition to a new land, which may or may not cater to their cultural, religious, ethnic, and social needs. This paper examines the role of adult education in the lives of Syrian women and education's ability to bridge the gap between cultures. We posit that education serves as a tool of self-expression and integration for Syrian women refugees in their adopted communities. Using a feminist life history method, the stories of three Syrian women will be discussed. In doing so, we revisit the definition of 'refugees' and 'immigrants' as posited by various scholars to shed light on the crisis and how it has risen from a counter-terrorism strategy in the UK and reveal the implications that this has had over the past years on the British education system.

KEYWORDS

Refugee; social justice; Arab culture; adult education; lifelong learning; gender; women empowerment

Introduction

Ten years after the outbreak of the civil war, Syria remains the site of the world's largest refugee crisis. More than 6.6 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes since 2011 and another 6.7 million people remain displaced inside Syria. Displaced Syrians have become refugees who have been rehomed in several countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Sweden, Germany, the UK and many others in Europe, Asia, Africa, North and South America, and Australia. Today, we continue to witness a rise in refugees who find themselves in similar ordeals, such as the Ukrainian War and the civil war in Sudan (alongside refugees fleeing from natural disasters). All have a major impact on European, British, and American refugee

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policies and some may even say that they perpetuate White privilege among refugee communities without consideration of how this affects lives.

This study was inspired by recent events and debates around ‘immigrants’ and ‘refugees’ and the impact of the war in Syria on the Syrian people and the World. The outline of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to give a context to Syria and evaluate the impact of the war on the Syrian people and the world. Secondly, in doing so, to explore topical issues around immigration, the refugee crisis, and the education of Syrian women, whilst revealing the complexities of intersectionality and its interplay within cultural and political spheres. Syrian women’s sense of belonging as settlers in the UK is an under-researched topic. Initial questions from this study were re-shaped to reflect the barriers, conflicts, and struggles that Syrian women of different ages and generations face in their immediate surroundings and how they articulate their sense of meaning and purpose as settlers in the North-West of England. More importantly, perhaps, the study reveals the role that adult education plays in their lives – firstly, as women and secondly, as refugees living in deprived areas. In doing so, the study utilises life histories as a feminist method of research to give a glimpse into the world of Muslim refugee women striving to create a better life for themselves, their children and their families in a new land while overcoming hurdles constructed by racism and inequalities within policies and bureaucracy.

Contextualising Syrian refugees

Syria and the world

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the protection and assistance of refugees is regarded as one of the pressing issues of our time (Franke 2022). On 1st January 2011, Syria was estimated to have a population of 24 million people, distributed over its 14 governorates. Arabs represent 80% of the population, with the rest being a mixture of other ethnic and religious minorities such as Kurds (10%), Turkmen (4%), Assyrians (3%), Armenians (1%), Circassians (1%) and Albanians among others (1%) (Khalifa 2013) (See Figure 1, UNHCR 2022).

Refugees are unlike migrants who choose to leave their country out of their own volition. Refugees are described according to the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR) as follows:

Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country... Someone unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. (Fitzpatrick 1996)

These distinctions are important, as the impact of this relocation is different for both these groups as are the conditions in which they restart their lives. Scholars (Feller 2005, Aleinikoff 2017, Douai *et al.* 2022) continue to argue that these definitions are vital in understanding global patterns of migration and how refugees fit into larger socio-political changes we are witnessing. Syria is amongst a few other countries devastated by war – Afghanistan, Iraq, Myanmar, and most recently Ukraine and Sudan. In many ways, the world continues to witness similar waves of people

Syrian population

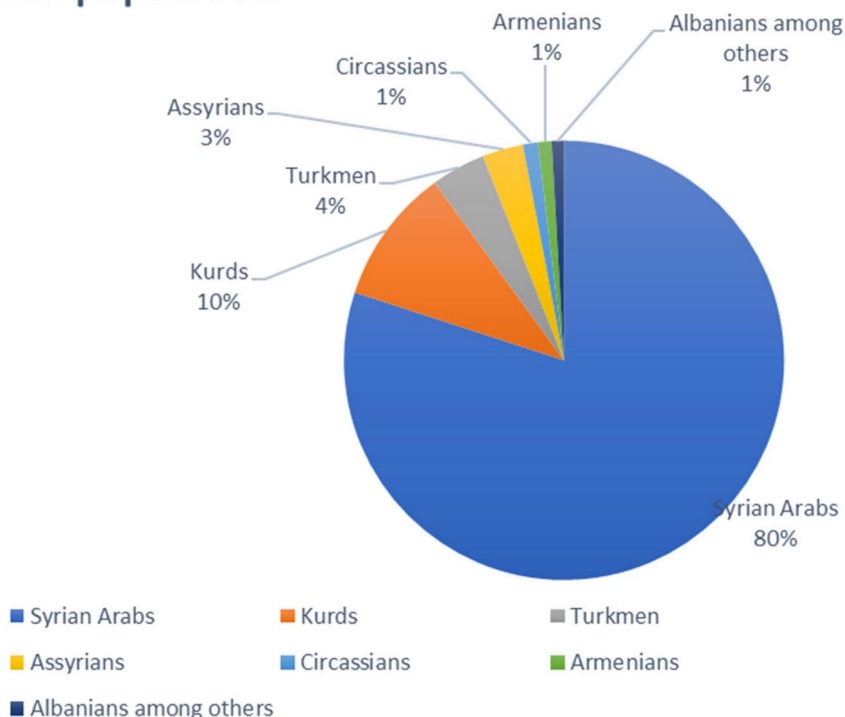


Figure 1. The breakdown of the Syrian population.

fleeing their homes and being internally displaced. In many European countries, ‘the Syrian refugee crisis debate rekindled the ideological alignments and exposed the fractured historical approaches to immigration’ (Douai *et al.* 2022, p. 94). Syria was the fifth most common country of nationality of people who applied for asylum in the UK after Iran, Iraq, Eritrea, and Albania (UNHCR 2022). Figure 2 (UNHCR 2022), shows refugees resettled to the European Union in 2009. In 2010, before the start of the civil war in Syria, there were 160 immigrants compared to 3895 immigrants in 2021.

The refugee crisis and our response to it is one of the pressing and growing social issues of our time (Aleinikoff 2017). Racialisation and xenophobia of refugees are just one of the many challenges that various policymakers, scholars and researchers are grappling with. Philosopher and sociologist Zygmunt Bauman described the refugee crisis as follows:

The strangers wishing to immigrate to Europe are like *uninvited guests* who have knocked at our door since the beginning of time. They tend to generate fear among the local population because they are *unknown*. The whole situation is a politically correct game between the opinion makers (politicians) and the submerged human mind (society and ordinary citizens). (in Medová 2018, p. 55)

For this study, we adopt an overarching definition of Bauman’s ‘uninvited guests’ as *refugees* – individuals, regardless of their legal status, who have fled their home country to seek protection and security in another country and cannot safely return

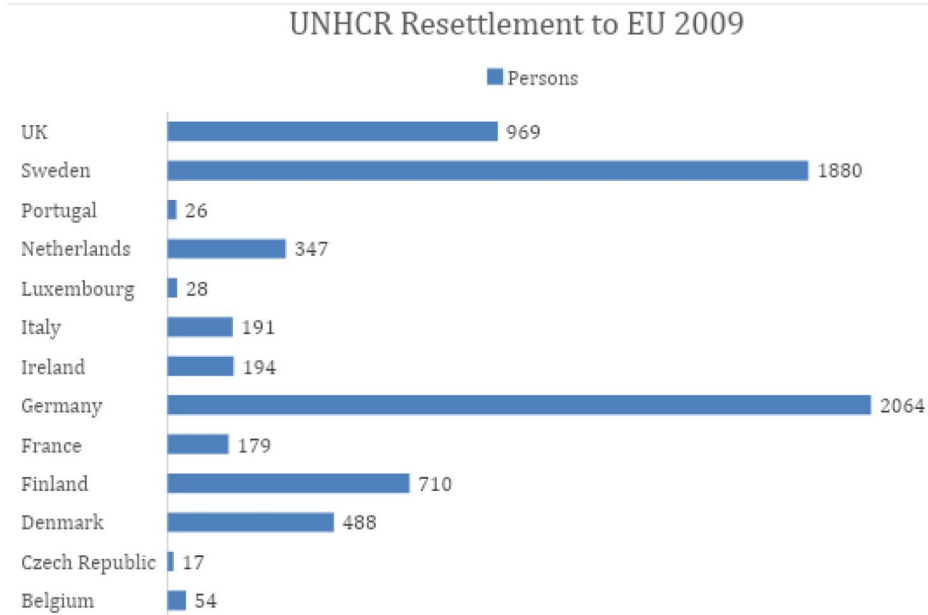


Figure 2. Refugees resettled to the European Union in 2009.

due to a well-founded fear of the prevailing circumstances in their country of origin. When referring to a ‘refugee’ or a ‘migrant’, one should not merely assume a homogenous category of people; it is made up of people with varied life experiences. Bilge and Denis (2010) call for an ‘inner diversity’ when it comes to understanding the experiences of women migrants. Thus, during this study, the complexities of being a woman, a Muslim, and a Syrian refugee, add to the issues that emerge as part of living in post-Brexit Britain.

Gender intersectionality

Intersectionality, according to Crenshaw (1989), is an analytic sensibility, a way of thinking about identity and its power relationship. It is an antidote to looking at women through fragmented identities. Intersectionality has gained a wider application than feminism and women’s issues and its scope widened to include several inter-linked social oppressions. It is a useful approach to understanding contemporary debates regarding young, female, Muslim Syrians settled in Britain. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the special rapporteur of the UN Secretariat on violence against women, stated that the term ‘intersectionality’ had become tremendously popular and was used in various UN and NGO forums (Yuval-Davis 2006).

The debate regarding the notion of ‘triple oppression’, which was at the heart of the discourse on gender and race by US and European thinkers and feminists is key here. The claim is that Black women suffered from three different oppressions, which were: social disadvantages, discrimination, and exploitation. Intersectionality as envisaged by feminists is a means of recognising that the category of woman does not adequately capture the multiple sources of oppression and exclusion women face on

account of their complex identities (Crenshaw 1989, Lorde 2011, Ekoh and Okoye 2022). Widening the category of women to include, race, sexuality, disability, and class intersectionality provides a framework for addressing how women are affected by several inequalities and how that affects their lives. Syrian women suffer from triple oppression amongst other socioeconomic barriers that affect their lives and their well-being. There is a growing need for research to delve into the experience of oppression ‘as women’, ‘as Muslims’, and ‘as immigrants and working-class’ persons. In concrete experiences of oppression, being oppressed as ‘Muslim’ is always constructed and intermeshed in other social divisions (i.e. gender, social class, disability status, sexuality, age, nationality, immigration status, geography, etc.). What this study has found, which is perhaps often overlooked, is that Syrian women and men live in urban cities, provincial towns, and rural villages where they may feel they belong, but often continue to be seen as ‘outsiders’ and as ‘uninvited guests’ for many reasons that may or may not directly be linked to their legal status in society. According to Al-Ali (2003, p. 2) the Middle East – Syrian included – is not a uniform and homogeneous region as Figure 1 shows. Likewise, amongst women of this region, there is also no archetypal Syrian woman. They are ‘women in the plural, inserted in quite diverse socio-economic and cultural arrangements’ (Moghadam 1993, p. 10). It is, thus, important, as Al-Ali (2003) noted that any analysis of women must first and foremost presuppose some context and set of concerns among women in an area of considerable diversity concerning geography, economic conditions, ethnic groups, social classes, religious affiliations, and linguistic communities.

Women living in communities within communities

‘Neo-patriarchy’ in the Muslim context

Sharabi (1988) was the first to introduce the concept of ‘neo-patriarchy’. It was used to describe different forms of authoritarianism within society (the macro-level of the state, the meso-level of the economy and the micro-level of the family). His concept was recognised as a useful tool to delve into issues that link modernity and patriarchy. Al Ali argues that Sharabi’s concept has been debated in recent years because he labelled ‘modern patriarchy as neopatriarchal’ which was often challenged.

Some argue that the emergence of Islamist movements today, cannot be described as ‘being backward’ and looking to the past. Islamist movements, in all their variety, are a modern phenomenon related to the nation-state, political and economic institutions and the family. Without trying to diminish the restrictive nature of many Islamist stipulations regarding [Syrian] women, it would be a fallacy to explain their frameworks in terms of ‘tradition’ and a rejection of modernisation. (Al-Ali 2002, p. 3)

The use of ‘neo-patriarchy’ as a term has been recently used by Crawley (2022) where it was argued that the complexities of intersections of race, gender, age, and ethnicity are essential factors that shape women’s experiences within a heavily racialised political scene. These are often ignored due to a ‘colonial blind spot’ within feminism in relation to international refugee policies and regimes (Crawley 2022, p. 356). The life stories of these three Syrian women reveal a great deal of overlap, as Abu-Lughod (1988) would claim, between attitudes towards marriage (from secular and

Islamist perspectives). These show both modern notions of conjugal love and an appreciation of the nuclear family as an ideal. The dynamics of gendered relationships within settled Syrian refugees in the North-West of England assert the premise that social and cultural aspects of being a refugee – of any gender – are much more complicated, especially when tinted by diasporic sensibilities, religion, culture, and tradition.

In recent years, media platforms have been flooded with negative stories of male Syrian refugees arriving from refugee camps in Calais, France and into the UK. Most of the stories focus on whether young, male refugees need protection or pose a security threat. During this study, when women were asked about the reason why young male refugees were the first to flee, some explained that evading military conscription in Syria is punishable by imprisonment. Many who refused to join the war died in custody after being locked up. Those who managed to reach the UK from Syrian refugee families were supported by being given council accommodation to settle in. In the North-West of England, some families were placed in the rural areas of Ormskirk and Skelmersdale whilst others were to reside in urban areas in the South and North of Liverpool, Merseyside. Al-Ali (2003, p. 218) draws from the work of Tucker (1993, p. vii) to suggest that regional diversity militates against generalising about women's lives in particular their access to power, economic resources, and social and legal standing. The diversity within the Syrian community in Britain emphasises the importance of gender as a social category. Discussions on Syrian women in the community invoke Islam and assumptions about the Islamic culture which influences any debate on gender organisation.

Scholars, such as Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatema Mernissi and Egyptian writer and Feminist Nawal El-Sadawi have both advocated for the rights of women in Islam. Mernissi, in *Women in the Muslim Unconscious* (1984) argued that there is a transhistorical view of female sexuality in Islam as 'dangerous' and 'destructive' in its power. Thus, a female needs close male supervision and control. While El-Sadawi has argued that Arab societies are often regarded as being heteronormative, masculinist, and patriarchal. As these cultures are often synonymous with shame narratives associated with the suppression of women and sexuality (Shaw *et al.* 2023). The view that Islam is responsible for restrictions on women's lives has been long debated. However, in her later work, Mernissi diverged from her earlier stipulations and argued that Islam was largely distorted by male jurists who wished to attribute to Islam misogynist tendencies that the prophet Muhammad did not possess. El-Saadawi took a similar position later in her life. She ascribed to the same view as Mernissi about Islam and gender relations. Al-Ali (2002, p. 3) wrote:

The Middle East was *not*, and is not, synonymous with Islam. Equally, Islam itself is lived heterogeneously. While most Middle Easterners are Muslims, there exist differences among Sunni and Shi'a Muslims as well as other Muslim groupings, such as the Alawite minority in Turkey. Women belonging to religious minority groups, such as the Maronites in Lebanon, or the Copts in Egypt are generally exposed to very similar, if not the same, cultural, and social codes and traditions as their Muslim counterparts of the same social class standing. Often traditions and customs are *not* rooted in religion per se.

For example, Al-Ali noted the case of female circumcision [FGM] as a custom that is not rooted in religion. FGM continues to be a problem that exists to this day in many parts of the Middle East, especially in developing countries. El-Saadawi widely wrote about the negative effects of this inhuman custom that entails the cutting of female genitalia. The reason for doing so is ingrained in many patriarchal cultures that believe that such a custom protects young women and ensures women's chastity. El-Saadawi, as a feminist and a psychiatrist, advocated against FGM. She openly spoke about the impact of such violence on young females' mental health, well-being, and bodies (Shaw 2018, Shaw and Silverio 2021). Many scholars, like Mernessi and El-Saadawi, raised awareness and advocated against such customs and traditions that restrict women and negatively impact women's lives, however, FGM is still practised among Muslim and Coptic women in the Middle East and Africa (Shaw *et al.* 2023).

Barriers to settlement and integration in the UK

Recent education policy and policymaking taking place within the context of a national security crisis, have given impetus to concerns about the radicalisation of young British Muslim citizens. Debates about what constitutes Britishness are not new, however, the rhetoric often relies on random demarcations of culture and emotive arguments. Currently, the government definition links British values to the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism. The spotlight of surveillance focuses evermore on the 'outsider' in what the world sees as modern Britain. In the absence of a collective and inclusive understanding of the society that we live in today which is defined in terms of countering extremism, it is important to establish how female refugees from all backgrounds define identity and belonging to be able to settle in post-Brexit Britain. It is, thus, particularly vital to re-visit the definition of immigrants which arises from a counter-terrorism strategy. It is seen to position Muslims, regardless of race, as outsiders which has begun to alienate a generation of young female Syrian Muslims and Syrian Muslim families in Britain. UK policies affect all settlers' lives; from refugees of all nationalities still adjusting to new lands to established British Muslims.

The impact is not only at a cultural level but also at societal, institutional, legal, and organisational levels. This is evident in how the British Muslim communities today continue to face a relentless assault from politicians and media actors who focus on problematic characteristics of Islam and Muslim culture. In the case of Syrian women refugees, who are negotiating life within their families and in their new country, and communities, many of the failures of policy can be seen as not addressing refugees' needs. Of all refugees resettled in the UK from January 2010 to December 2021, around 70% were Syrian citizens as shown in [Figure 2](#) (UNHCR 2022). Some may say that welcoming refugees was not just seen as a humanitarian and legal obligation, but as an investment that can yield substantial economic dividends (Legrain 2016). [Figure 3](#) shows the number of Syrian people seeking asylum in the UK (UNHCR 2022).

A growing volume of evidence today demonstrates that the UK rhetoric, policy, and counterterrorism framework centring on communities as 'suspects', has

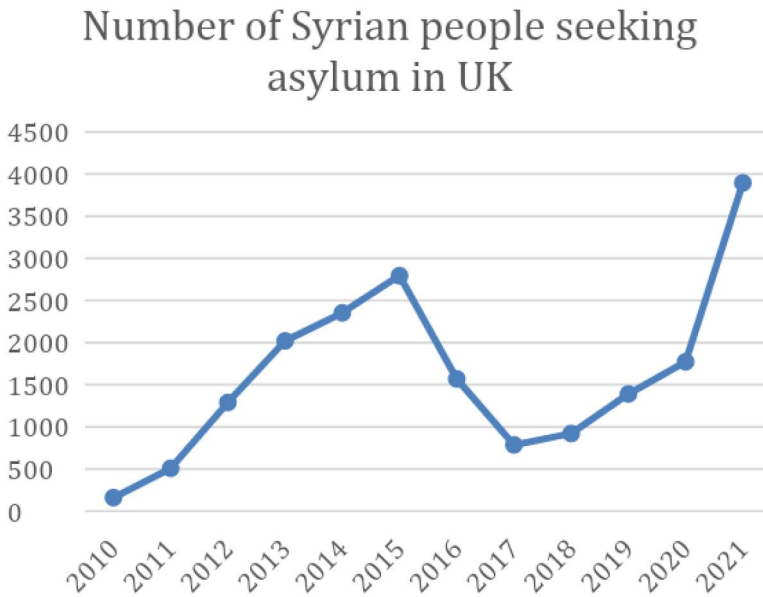


Figure 3. The number of Syrian people seeking asylum in the UK.

inadvertently radicalised young Muslims (Thomas 2021). As Islamophobia and xenophobia, because of government policy, intensify, so do the anxieties and significant issues that rise and continue to be unchallenged amongst many communities. For many refugees, the process of relocating has meant starting life all over again from scratch whilst maintaining the family unit. Uprooting oneself from familiar surroundings and economic ties under dangerous circumstances makes relocation a difficult process. Fleeing from conflict entails leaving behind material wealth and status. Burman and Chantler (2005, p. 68) state, ‘issues of poverty and class position intersect with minoritisation in ways that overlap with other women, but also intensify the barriers faced by minoritized women in particular ways’. This is especially true for refugees who have educational qualifications and jobs that require a high level of training but find themselves facing poverty and minority status. Upon entry into their host country, they are often forced to accept jobs below their qualification or retrain whilst enduring delays on their applications, which compounds the problem (Allsopp *et al.* 2014). In the eyes of many Syrian refugees living in the UK, this issue of class is one of many barriers that play into the negative perceptions of refugees as people from socially and culturally ‘inferior’ nations who have very little to contribute to society.

Life stories of women refugees

Feminist life history method

According to Chaitin (2004), it was the German sociologist Fritz Schütze (Szczepanik and Siebert 2016) who initially proposed the use of life stories or biographical interviewing as an investigative technique to examine the narrative meanings that people

assign to their lives. These social phenomena captured the storytellers' lived experiences in a way that allowed for catharsis and further dialogue.

Through catharsis and paroxysm, refugees expose the fallacies of humanitarianism and nation-state-based conception of rights and instead articulate a novel imaginary of borderless humanity as the basis for politically qualified lives (Salih 2018, p. 135).

The life story method is not only productive but also a sensitive method to elicit rich information about real and unique challenges that a person may have lived or experienced (Sharma and Bluck 2022). As a method, it is classed as a kind of phenomenological research methodology (Van Manen 2002, p. 2), where the research focuses on how people interpret and value their life experiences. To get a glimpse of the experiences that the person has had, a researcher should, therefore, strive to know what the participants have gone through, which can be a very complex and time-consuming process.

The biographical mode of interviewing is predicated on the premise that each person has a distinct life experience and perspective to share. According to Van Manen (2002), the role of the investigator becomes complicated as he or she attempts to unravel the lived experiences and how the participants see their world. The process may require mutual trust and openness to the uniqueness of the experience for the researcher to capture the meanings behind the stories and for the participants to find their voice. To impose any restrictions on the participants' development, or growth, or to tamper in any way with the natural progression of the process alters the overall outcomes.

Through a feminist life history method, the narratives of the three women unfold and one can sense how they validate their sense of self, thus reinforcing the feeling – both in themselves and the research as the listener – that identity is in the process of being constructed through the vehicle of the storytelling. In partaking in such a process, it was evident that gathering the stories of the Syrian refugee women in a relaxed and friendly manner allowed for a complex and nuanced understanding of their lives to be unveiled. It is argued that 'the inclusion of insider and outsider cultural perspectives' and encouraging multiple transcriptions of the data not only brings depth and rigour but also complements the primary areas of inquiry (Bunn *et al.* 2022, p. 130). The women's narratives seemed to have not only been cathartic for them, as individuals, telling their stories, but also the stories form an integral part of current and future research. By applying a feminist lens, we were able to see how gender inequality affected the lives of these women. By nature, a feminist life history method is political in the way in which it frames women's lives and how power structures operate in their lives.

Feminist life history methods serve a political purpose, to:

negotiate openness, expose hegemonic power arrangements and inherent silences, highlight secrets of oppression and resistance, and revalue knowledge that risks being disqualified in current social sciences. (Roets and Goedgeluck 2007, p. 85)

To shatter stereotypes, we bring together the life stories of three Syrian women whose stories capture the complex diasporic positioning of contemporary Syrian women settled in the North-West, in the UK. To reflect the many lived realities of

Syrian women and their voices from various diasporic contexts, three counter-narratives have been chosen for this study. To maintain confidentiality, the participants' names have been changed and any information that could be used to identify them has also been altered. The stories highlight common experiences with diasporic sensibilities, gender difficulties, and intergenerational storytelling.

The stories of the presented three women provide fresh insights into 'transnational and postcolonial criticism by emphasising the diaspora's gendered resilience through the act of collective storytelling' (Anis *et al.* 2023, p. 2). The narratives highlight the contemporary sociopolitical challenges raised by three women refugees from diverse backgrounds. Their stories contest the stereotypes around Syrian Muslim, Kurdish, or Arab identities. The three narratives from this study show that a newer variety of diasporic and exilic identities have developed over the years for many Syrians living outside of Syria (Anis *et al.* 2023, p. 2). These identities continue to evolve and change showing women's voice and their perspectives as both, insiders, and outsiders.

Their act of narration challenges many assumptions of Syrian women refugees as voiceless victims within predominantly patriarchal communities. They revealed common assumptions about refugees' identities and, what Anis *et al.* (2023, p. 2), referred to as, 'the frequent lumping together of Arab, Kurdish, Syrian, Muslim, and Middle Eastern' identities. What was emerging from the conversations is that most Syrian-Arab readers know little about the magnitude of the language barriers that some of the women face when settling in the UK, while for the same reason, the West knows little about the Syrian women's cultural and identity struggles because they tend to keep themselves confined within the walls of their homes and immediate communities.

Stories of Syrian women

Through their storytelling and the articulation of their distinct lived experiences, the three women who narrate their stories below are active agents of change within their extended cross-border communities, addressing issues that predominantly affect women. Let us begin with Asman. A 33-year-old Kurdish-Syrian, female, mother of two boys, ages 11 and 13, and a housewife who was completing her entry-level English language course at the time and has arrived in the UK as a Syrian refugee. She began with the following words:

I was born in Syria, in a hospital in Aleppo. At that time, my father was in the front and my mother was alone ... simultaneously my parents had an idea; they thought of the same name, and when my father called ... the night of the birth, then together they said on the phone "Asman" and then they decided to call me Asman and it turned out that it means the highest sky, that was heaven ... and that's the name they gave me.

From the beginning of the conversation there was an in-depth story about her naming, which is tied directly to one of her aspirations; to learn to the highest degree possible. She expressed the belief that her name had not only been of significance for her and her parents but a collective significance as well as she had hoped to be the first female to have a higher education in her family. Asman narrated that, in Kurdish culture, it is more difficult for women, especially young women, to pursue

education beyond the primary or secondary stages. This is because the expectation is often that the female is married young whilst at a child-bearing age. Asman was 19 when she was 'spoken for' by a family relative who was 9 years her senior. Asman continues to narrate:

At the age of 19, I got married and moved to different parts of Syria with my husband and his family. He had four brothers who all worked within the family business selling various goods (mainly perfumes and textiles). I found myself a new bride sleeping in the same room on a mattress on the floor with four men ... strangers to me, and a husband who I did not know anything about I was so young when I saw him a handful of times- we hardly spoke to one another. But I thought he was handsome [she laughs] ... I can tell that his mother did not want me She said I was troubled because I enjoyed school, I loved to learn, and I wanted to carry on with my education. Little did I know then that I was destined to be a 'housewife'.

The Kurdish identity is subsumed under ethnic categorisations that do not distinguish Kurds from other minority ethnic groups – a factor that renders them 'invisible' in government statistics (Holgate *et al.* 2009, p. 2). The Census and the Labour Force Survey renders Kurds invisible because they are classified as 'white' and while this is subdivided into various ethnic or national groups, most Kurds are therefore less visible than other 'white other' as there is no specific category for them (Holgate *et al.* 2009, p. 3). Kurds are, thus, less visible than other 'white groups' such as Irish, Welsh or Eastern Europeans. To add to this dilemma is the political tension when Kurds are asked about their nationality with little option, they find themselves defined as Syrian, Turkish, Iraqi, or Iranian. This has, therefore, led to political sensitivities and debates; as 'not only has the Kurdish origin been masked before leaving Turkey... it is also hidden from the moment of arrival on foreign soil' (Laiser 1996, p. 127).

Asman explains that as a young Kurdish woman, at the time, she only completed her first year of secondary education when she was taken out of school by her father to be married and left her family home. She looked at her children as she emphasised that education, to her, was everything – 'It gives us [women/Kurds] an opportunity to have a better life ...'. she quickly claimed. Asman arrived in the UK with her two boys to settle in the North-West of England. She moved over 8 months from cities across the UK to Liverpool where she was to reside. She spoke of the poor conditions of the first housing she had to remain at until her documents were finalised. She struggled as she had no money and only a small amount of UK money to get by. She trusted that everything that was arranged by the UK government and the council would be better than what she had seen back in Syria from destruction and violence. She had asked for an interpreter on several occasions to translate English to Kurdish – but she found this request difficult as there was often a shortage it seemed, and she was left weeks and even months before being contacted and seen again by officials. Asman was a trilingual speaker; Kurdish, Arabic and Turkish – but she was afraid to inform officials at immigration. When asked about her ability to speak the Turkish language, she laughed and said '... all the TV drama we watched was Turkish, I had to pick it up'.

When Asman arrived in the UK alone with her boys – without her husband who was still completing his visa requirements and paperwork, she struggled to get her two boys to enrol to begin their schooling. They remained months after months at

home since they arrived in the UK in the middle of the academic year. After all, she could not speak or write English to fill out the enrolment forms and she found it very difficult to express herself to others who were able to help and support her settle into her new life. She narrates:

I felt alone and embarrassed ... Embarrassed that I did not understand, and I wanted to know where we would live and where my kids go to school Basic things that I used to do seemed daunting and scary. I wanted to make friends and go out and buy my groceries every day, but I was so afraid and embarrassed ... I felt helpless. I went one day to the council's One-stop shop to get help with setting up my bills. I asked for an interpreter, and they could not find one. I had to wait many weeks, so I asked the landlord who spoke some Arabic to help me. He was not much help, but he tried After three weeks, we finally had heating in the house, and after 1 year, the boys started school and we registered with a local GP. I found myself crying because the simple things that I thought I could do were almost impossible now. My husband who phoned us every week was not in any better condition too; his visa to join us was delayed and he was not sure how to help us from so far away. It was a difficult period for all of us.

Asman started attending English language tuition at a local college. Though it took her over 4 months to chase her application and for the oversubscribed college to send her a start date letter, she quickly found herself regaining some of her independence during this period by making short conversations during her class time and afterwards with like-minded refugees who all found themselves in similar situations. One of the biggest challenges Asman points out was getting the support needed for her eldest son who suffers from epilepsy seizures and needed medical care. She relied on her youngest son to interpret on many occasions. As the next generation, he adapted quickly to living in the North-West and spoke in a Liverpool accent. He was making new friends while excelling in the school he finally started. One day in the middle of the night, Asman recalls:

I heard a loud noise and knew something had happened. My youngest was shouting that his brother was having an epileptic seizure. I did not know what to do. I held him down and cried. I wanted to phone the ambulance but what would I say?! We were all so shocked to speak, we had no words It did not last long- they are so irregular and do not last too long, only a few seconds and he recovered slowly, but the look on his face terrified me. I was a bad mother! I said to myself. I cannot look after my children here. I must do more ... I want to do better ... I must do better in this life.

Nariman is a 29 female, Kurdish, primary school teacher in Syria. She moved to the UK with all three of her children. Her youngest boy is 5 and her eldest is 11. Her husband, 41, worked as a carpenter. She arrived from Turkey to London, then was moved to the North-West. The journey seemed easier as she believes that having had more savings and being a skilled primary school teacher and a carpenter in Syria has helped her application and migration process. She spoke nostalgically of Syria as a country of great wealth and warm people. She also identifies as Kurdish/Syrian and describes life in Syria as a great place to bring up children where food is fresh, and the people are kind-hearted. It was a devastating situation to have to leave this behind, especially her job which she loved so much. She narrates:

I was born in Aleppo, Syria. I have always wanted to be a teacher, so I continued to study until I achieved my teaching qualifications and worked in a primary school close

to the house. I was lucky really because all my three sisters were older than me and they were married quickly, but I was left to study because I was too young. [She laughs] They almost forgot about me for a while which was to my advantage.... I used to walk to work every day and see my students going to school too. I was doing very well.

When the war began, Nariman was to quickly be married to a family relative; a second cousin. She gave birth soon after to her three children: 2 boys, aged 5 and 11, and a girl, aged 8. When she arrived in the UK and the family resided in a housing accommodation in London, Nariman fell pregnant, but due to stress, she explains, and the uncertainty of the situation at the time as an immigrant, she lost the baby. She continues:

I was devastated but did not know how to express how I felt... I had to put on a brave face for my children who needed me.... I told myself this is for the better, why shall I have another child now? I did not have a home. The timing and the situation were poor- we had nowhere to live, and everything felt uncertain- we could go back to Syria tomorrow.

Kurds lived in Kurdistan under the national jurisdiction of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Nariman explains that over time, these nations have denied the Kurds their identity, culture, and homeland and their political representation by the force of arms. Many of the national celebrations such as the Kurdish Newroz which is a festival celebrating the start of Spring still take place in many countries within Kurdish communities as a peaceful act of self-expression and a form of activism.

The combination of authoritarian nationalistic and/or religious ideology and state of power in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria has led Kurds to seek asylum in countries around the world. (Van Bruinessen 2000)

Many of Liverpool's Kurds in the diaspora, Asman and Nariman included, take this opportunity to celebrate the beginning of Spring and network within their communities. Upon settling in the North-West of England, Nariman continued her education firstly by taking English language classes and, at the time of narrating her life story, she was at level 2 of her English language qualification which she was proud of talking about and sharing how she volunteers at her children's primary school to help with daily chores and learn on the role. She concluded:

There is a growing number of Kurds in specific areas and communities that need support having fled oppression. Housing associations for example are the biggest problem... I have 2 boys and a girl in a small 2-bedroom house. She cannot sleep in the same room with the 2 boys! My application is taking more than a year- to this day! The cultural centres and women's organisations do not understand us. They send us from one to another for advice and services. It is worse during and since COVID-19 as the 'one-stop shop' was often closed or understaffed.

One can conclude that behind the facade of the seemingly self-sufficient Kurdish communities, lies considerable poverty which is often found in refugee communities. This may be a result of a lack of English language skills, inability to speak English altogether, a lack of education and relevant skills, all mean that unemployment is high and those who are employed by the men tend to work within the 'ethnic enclave' for long hours and low wages whereas employment among women is very low.

Amal is a 35-year-old Syrian female who worked as a qualified beautician in her salon in Damascus, Syria. When asked if she was of Kurdish origins, she quickly dismissed the question and said, 'No, I am Syrian.... Arab. The Kurds hate us!' The integration between the Kurds and Syrians meant that according to Amal:

Walking down the local high streets in Syria, in Kurdish food shops, cafes, coffee shops, and hairdressers, you listen to languages and the hustle and bustle of these distinct communities. You can see this in social and cultural activities like celebrating festivals and religious celebrations– Ramadan or Eid.... You can see this in locally run events where the lines between who is Kurdish and who is Syrian are blurred. They still hate 'us' though- Syrian- Arabs because, for political reasons, they struggle to be recognised in the country.

Amal at the time of telling her life story, has received her dual nationality. She is now a Syrian/British citizen, unlike Asman and Nariman whose journey to citizenship seems much longer. Amal's English was at an intermediate level. She had completed her English language qualification and had also completed upon arrival her Beautician courses to practise in the UK. She volunteered first at several salons to gain further experience, then with the support of women in her immediate community, she opened a mobile business as a hairdresser and beautician. Her husband and two boys, aged 15 and 13, arrived in the UK with her. Her husband, 44, was training to be a doctor in Syria, so when he arrived in the UK, he took equivalency medical exams to be able to continue his practice. Amal's boys studied in a secondary school and quickly adapted to a new life in the UK. She explained:

Many women in the community find it difficult to go out to have a haircut at one of the salons in the city centre. They would rather have someone who speaks their language who understands their culture and modesty and who makes them feel comfortable in their own homes.... Most of my clients wear the Hijab.... I have also been cutting young boys' and girls' hair and found it an excellent opportunity to improve my English. I made many friends from all nationalities Syrian, Pakistan, Sudan, Arab, Egyptian... I love meeting people. Many of my clients' husbands work long hours and they are out all day. My clients are mostly housewives... I built my business name that way... One client brought me two and three clients. The word spreads fast and I think they know that I am good at what I do.

What is apparent is that the new generation of Syrian women Refugees has seemingly laid the foundations for entrepreneurship often within local communities. Talking to women within Amal's immediate communities about her business, it was noted that she was fortunate to have the opportunities that she had and that her husband was educated to a good level and allowed her to pursue her passion. Women often are either encouraged or discouraged by their husbands to educate themselves. It was clear that women sacrificed their education to maintain harmony and peace in the household focusing only on the well-being and the education of the children from behind closed doors, whilst some more fortunate women were able to pursue education or start a business from the comforts of their homes or kitchens. Amal concludes:

It took me a long time to get my papers and qualifications to train in local UK salons. It was not always easy. People looked at me sometimes funny and said mean things. I did not like it, but I held my tongue because I had to. I wanted to finish my training so

fast to start my own business. I had a goal. My neighbour two doors down also started her business making pastries and Syrian food and selling it on social media platforms She is doing well but her husband stopped paying for anything anymore- he told her that since she earns money, she must pay for things. My husband did the same at the beginning when I started my business, but I sat him down with a pen and paper and I told him what I can and what I cannot pay for. He must pay for his children too.

Amal's perseverance and pursuit of education as a means of asserting herself and self-improvement made her business a popular name in the community. Due to COVID-19, her business suffered, but she continued to use the available resources, family ties and networking to live within her means. One can conclude from all three life stories that those who lack English language skills upon arrival in the UK and those who take longer to access the UK's education system, have more difficulties in getting a resolution to everyday life problems. Additionally, many of the Kurdish Syrian refugees who fall into this category may have problems related to their immigration status which increases their vulnerability and exposes them to greater exploitation in the labour market.

Analysis

Syrian women refugees are in a unique position that poses challenges that can help or hinder refugees' status and integration into the host country. Based on the three women's narratives, many of the challenges for policy changes can be addressed through tailored support measures, widening the reach of adult education, and offering targeted community interventions. A change in perception, first and foremost, is perhaps the initial step to welcoming the 'uninvited guests' into the host country and extending the hand of many national, regional, and local services. For many, gaining or continuing education allows for adult learners' independence and crossing boundaries of culture and language. Amal's narrative, compared to the first two women, is evident that education enables the individual to overcome political and socio-economic barriers. In doing so, her education would allow for social mobility and, in turn, challenge her subjectivity to a form of 'triple oppression'. The narratives also show how education encouraged all three women to gain skills that paved the way for possibilities of social interaction within and outside of their communities. In doing so, one can conclude that education has the power to support female refugees to become economically independent and to regain a social life which, in turn, may help broaden their roles as citizens of society (beyond the patriarchal nature of their communities or households).

The life stories ultimately emphasise the need for tailored interventions. These interventions can be, for example, around the conditions of housing available for refugees upon arrival or retraining for a job and/or negotiating a plan of support for many women who arrive initially *alone* and are left to their own devices. New refugee entrants are expected not only to be conversant with aspects of living in Britain but also to be financially independent and aware of how to use the services that are provided by the host country. Education alone can and has the power to help prevent many Syrian refugees in the UK from exploitation on many levels.

Almost thirty years ago, Bauman (2005, p. 14) argued that postmodernity offered a genuine emancipatory ‘chance of laying down arms, suspending border skirmishes waged to keep the stranger away, taking apart the daily erected mini-Berlin walls meant to keep distance and to separate’. This chance has passed, and the borders stand firm, more fortified than ever as exclusion and assimilation still exist.

Veck (2018, p. 12 cited Bauman 2005) indicated, that

the gardener’s vision of a perfectly harmonious landscape, which guided the governance of modern societies, has come to be replaced by “the current ‘utopia’ of hunters”, which is essentially “‘deregulated’, ‘privatized’, and ‘individualized’”.

He concluded that, ‘the defining state has lost its capacity to define, the gardener has left the garden’ (Veck 2018, p. 12), and now is the chance to let those who have been dubbed ‘strangers’ develop naturally rather than according to the wishes of bureaucrats. Undoubtedly, all three narratives show a potential for individual growth and a willingness to partake in society, even within their limited means. In 2005, the UK’s Home Office published *Integration Matters: National Strategy for Integration* (Home Office 2005), in which the inclusion of refugees in the UK was firmly connected to language acquisition and employment. In response to this approach to the integration of refugees, Pinson and Arnot (2010, p. 54) write:

The decision to include only refugees in integration programmes symbolically deepened the exclusion from which asylum seekers already suffered. In effect the message to schools from the Home Office was that only some of their students needed to be integrated, to be prepared for a national model of democratic citizenship or membership of a local community.

As a result of the government’s policy, a division was created: it is ‘them’ and not ‘us’ that needs integration. The narratives of all three women showed that, from a very early age, education meant so much to them and their families. Education was seen as a means of social mobility. It plays a significant role not only through education providers but also as ‘a gateway for leading a new and peaceful life and being part of a wider community’ (Dada 2012, p. 153). This means for many adult learners, refugees and non-refugees arriving in the UK (like Asman, Nariman and Amal), that language acquisition is vital for communication and for studying and that only education can lead to employment and, thus, better prospects. For this reason, it is of utmost importance to invest in adequate resourcing by the government, local authorities, and educational providers to give settings across the country what is needed to offer appropriate opportunities and support for all citizens.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that there is a need for further research that engages with Muslim refugee communities and tackles the hurdles constructed by racism, Islamophobia, government policy and bureaucracy. There is a growing demand towards recognising the many struggles in the lives of the refugees, and in Britain as a host country. There is a pressing need to debate and openly discuss the importance of eliminating political, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers. From the presented narratives, the study questions the efforts of many educational institutions with ‘waiting

lists' that are unable to offer opportunities for all to learn and expand their skills, settle, and effectively integrate into their new lives. For many – who are also from ethnic minority groups – education can be a step towards combating racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia and alleviating the alienation that they may experience as refugees. The life stories show how education empowered women to overcome their circumstances to better their lives and that of their families. Adult learners like Asman, Nariman and Amal, spoke with pride of how they were able to apply what they have experienced in the classrooms to real-life situations in society. Thus, the pursuit of education has given a voice to those unheard and an ability to have some say in how they plan their learning activities and, ultimately, their life stories. In doing so, encouraging a lifelong learning mindset gives adult learners a voice as they share their knowledge and lived experiences and in turn assert themselves in their new lives.

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