



# The gendered realities of #displacement: Syrian women in Istanbul

Helen Mackreath  
March, 2017



Syrian women are existing between different layers of expectation. In Istanbul power manifests itself in different spaces. It is in the house, on the street, between other Syrian women, between other Turkish women, between men of all nationalities, between Syrian social convention, between Turkish social convention, between different religious conventions, between the realities of



displacement. In winter, when the fires burn in makeshift lead stoves behind market stalls, it is the women and children who are still there on their cardboard squares. In summer the heat entices out an increasing scrabble of bodies on the streets, dry skinned and empty palmed.

*There is no universal experience of displacement, just as there is no universal “woman’s experience”<sup>[i]</sup>, but displacement is gendered in the way it forces women to navigate spectrums of power.*

And while gender “captures only one axis of women’s interests and identifications (the relevant axes include, variously, class, race, ethnicity, religion, kin and other status differentials such as age)”<sup>[ii]</sup>, it is their specific identities as women which are often being directly targeted by policies, directly or indirectly administered. In many instances women have a more intimate and direct relationship with governing authorities through their identities as mothers to children who need education, vaccinations, birth certificates, milk; through their legal redress for issues of sexual harassment, divorce proceedings, labour exploitation; and often, although not always, by being the ones to seek out information - furniture to buy, drugs to administer, language classes to enroll in. In this way they may be seen as more vulnerable to processes of Foucault’s notion of biopower, broadly understood as “a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations.”<sup>[iii]</sup>

In Istanbul displaced Kurds, Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan and many other refugees and migrants make and remake their lives. I spent some months in the spring and summer of 2016 talking to Syrian women living across Zeytinburnu, Esenler, Okmeydanı, Tarlabaşı, Fatih, Balat districts of the city about displacement, trying to unpick some of its manifestations and permutations, and what follows are only a few tentative observations taken from those encounters.

*The way women navigate new responsibilities, burdens, layered identities might be a good starting point from which to understand ‘ways in which norms are*



*lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated'.* [\[iv\]](#)

Taking Mahmood's framing of the concept of agency, in which she encourages us to recognise different manifestations of agency, which may equally appear as forms of passivity and docility, [\[v\]](#) enables observing the multiplicity of responses of women to displacement rather than locking them within a dualistic, and intrinsically antagonistic, framework of subordination and subversion.

Addressing the challenges confronting women in displacement should not fall into the moral narrative trap of 'deserving' women and their 'undeserving' male counterparts, [\[vi\]](#) but rather the focus here will be highlighting specific forms of power which impact women, while recognising that particular and damaging burdens are also placed on men and that the new roles and realities which both are experiencing are intrinsically related. Segmentation and fragmentation across culture, class, and faith are imposing additional barriers—women are not necessarily all in it together. Hierarchies and inequalities are being imposed in how women access information, find confidence, cope with trauma. This is often associated with class factors—those women with money can mobilise more resources and women with different class status have different struggles—but it is also linked to other things, i.e. support networks, religion, age, personality, location. These social hierarchies are reflections of existing stratifications of society in Syria, or differentiated senses of entitlement—in Fatih, one Syrian women's group rejected the price of labour for knitting offered by another Syrian women's group. The aim was collective pooling of resources, labour and distribution, the result was division and judgment.

Syrian women are arriving in an already entrenched system of patriarchy in Turkey. Patriarchy is also embedded in the responses of Turkish women to their Syrian 'guests'—the practice of Syrian women marrying Turkish men, often as a coping mechanism, turns Turkish women against them, not their husbands. [\[vii\]](#) Second wives, often the identity which Syrian women are forced to assume, are regarded as prostitutes by the rest of society. This is a basic survival strategy, out



of economic necessity, and to gain security, a home, access to a social network. According to official data from the Turkish Statistics Institute (TUIK), almost 3,600 Syrian women married Turkish men in 2015. Feminist groups in Istanbul have not sought to increase their capacity to respond to the issues of Syrian women—according to one of the few collectives which *is* dealing with Syrians, most feminist groups believe the Syrian issue is not for them to deal with, but for other NGOs. They are continuing to focus instead on the many other vulnerable women—Turkish or other migrants—in the city, who have also often been ignored. Some of these groups are now starting to realise that Syrian Gender Based Violence is important, but they don't know how to get funds for their work.

*Issues specific to women are still not embedded components of refugee response; women are not central in efforts for going forward.*

'The humanitarian system has not seen the point of GBV', says Özgül Kaptan, director of KADAV (Women's Solidarity Foundation), 'it took almost three years for us to get funding from the EU'. In many cases the rights which Syrian women have on paper are not available in practice. Many marriages are not registered officially since they require the Syrian party to have a residence permit in Turkey - if women want to take their husbands to court over abuse, neglect, divorce, they can't legally prove they're married. If a woman is a second wife, her baby is registered under the name of the legal wife - she loses all rights to her child, resulting in the loss of their identity, rights, future. The sexual harassment of Syrian women, alongside Turkish women and other vulnerable minority groups, has been well documented. Much of this sexual harassment is insidious. One director of a feminist collective related how the centre had received telephone calls from Turkish men asking if there were vulnerable women who needed their shelter, a pretext for them marrying them. Another man in Istanbul, the '*bakkal*', or corner shop man, of the street, was calling on behalf of an old neighbour - he'd made a list of women's organisations and was calling them all up asking for women. He'd already tried a Syrian woman, he said, but wasn't happy with her, and was now looking for a Turkish woman.



*Women are being targeted in specific realms of their lives as mothers.*

While women should not be reduced to this role alone [\[viii\]](#), the lack of access to family planning services constitutes another act of violence against them, forcing continuous motherhood on their, often traumatised, bodies and taking away ownership of their reproductive rights. Two examples can be elaborated on here to demonstrate this. The first is their being denied, in parts of Turkey, the distribution of milk which is being provided for babies of Turkish mothers. The second is in the precarious national legality, for some, over the children they give birth to, with increasing numbers of babies running the risk of statelessness owing to the lack of legal rights afforded to their mothers.

In Izmir, the 'Süt Kuzusu' [\[ix\]](#) (Milk Lamb) campaign has been running since 2005, in which Izmir Metropolitan Municipality distributes milk to families with children between the ages of 0-5 years. By 2008 the amount of milk being distributed had increased to four litres every two-weeks for each child. Families who want to benefit from the campaign must apply to the municipality with their family registration document and identity cards. However, Syrians are not able to benefit from it since they do not have Turkish citizenship, despite the large numbers of Syrian children in desperate need of milk and the large quantity of milk which is being left surplus. One female member of an NGO involved with Syrians in the city described encouraging Turkish women to give their surplus milk to needy Syrian women, but was prevented from doing so by the driver of one of the milk lorries, who told her that such an act was 'forbidden', and the milk was only for the consumption of the 'given' child.



[Photo](#) by [Gytis Cibulskis](#) (flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

The explicit denial of milk to Syrian mothers holds symbolic importance if milk is understood as a ‘female good’[\[x\]](#). Milk is one of the most basic units of the capitalist political economy[\[xi\]](#), a symbol of welfare, and penetrative of female identity and sexuality. Its denial constitutes violence against women on two fronts – firstly as providers to their children, and secondly as potential participants in the Turkish welfare economy, equal to Turkish women not along lines of citizenship but along lines of common identifiers as women and mothers. The particular example of Turkish women being commanded not to share their milk with Syrian women by a Turkish man also denies a common platform of exchange, and represents an explicit patriarchal intrusion into matters of female solidarity, child-rearing and control over intimate female private decisions and spaces.

*An increasing number of babies born to Syrian parents in Turkey are at risk of being stateless owing to legal discrimination against their mothers.*

According to the current Syrian Nationality Law, in Legislative Decree 276/1969,



Syrian women cannot pass on their nationality to their children.<sup>[xii]</sup> In some circumstances for Syrian mothers giving birth to Syrians in Turkey, the father might not be recorded on the birth report if he is not present and the mother does not have their marriage, or his birth, certificate, or his name may be misspelled in transliteration (Arabic names are written in the Turkish alphabet, which may cause confusion later if names are translated back into Arabic and do not match the father's name).<sup>[xiii]</sup> As a result, without the father's name on the birth report, the child may not be able to prove a right to Syrian citizenship. This is one of many other threats to gaining citizenship, including parents not being registered, or under-aged Syrian women marrying, or Syrian women entering a polygamous marriage with, a Turkish man in which the marriage is not legally registered.

*For Syrian women in displacement, with little control over their reproductive rights, they may also be in a position of losing control of the identity and future rights of their child.*

On the one hand they have the responsibility, often against their choice, of being the procreators of the future Syrian nation, despite permanent uncertainty over their status within it and its future trajectory; on the other hand they have been made powerless and reduced to their reproductive function. Another form of aggression for mothers, sometimes quite literal, is in the burden of bringing up children who are desensitised, and sometimes even attracted, to violence. This may be due to violence practiced against them by fathers and mothers at home; the experience of violence in Syria; the constant exposure to it on television, online and other platforms of communication where violence is the dominant theme; and the frequency of violence in conversations between adults, which the children are more likely to overhear owing to restricted living spaces. Such intimate relationships with violence, practiced within the private and public spheres, adds another emotional burden to the responsibility of child-raising.

*But if Mahmood's concept of agency is taken as a frame, in which she draws on Foucault's subject, who is intrinsically tied within the historically and culturally*



*specific disciplines*[\[xiv\]](#), then there are multiple ways in which Syrian women are enacting agency.

The Syrian women who took her Turkish husband to court to provide the child care he was neglecting, the young woman who mobilised surveys of conditions in the camps around the border, the women setting up their own businesses or community centres.

In Okmeydanı district, Syrian women gather at the meeting of the Turkish Okmeydanı Association, heavily clad even in the heat of the sun and even though it is five pm during Ramadan. Okmeydanı does not have a particularly large number of Syrians - around 500 in total. There are many other ostracised groups here, notably a large Alevi population, who are navigating their own identities and belongings. Graffiti everywhere reflects the left-leaning politics of the area; boys play football in Barcelona FC stripes down along the alleys; there is an altercation between three rubbish collectors; men yelling to advertise their wares. A police 'scorpion' van waits on the corner - there is a heavy state security presence. It is all women at the Association on this day - the mothers who bring children to browse the donated clothes, the women who come asking for an appointment at the hospital, the director of the Okmeydanı Association, who sits with dirty blonde hair puffing smoke into the air. It is an older woman, a little distressed, who comes in to find a hospital appointment. The women at the meeting are practising the art of presence[\[xv\]](#), coming clutching notebooks in hand, ready to take note, to document and think and contribute to the changes happening in 'their' community. It is their community - they live there, they socialise there, they have their problems there. Their bodies are occupying that space and they are active social actors in shaping it. But whether or not it *is* their community is a delicate matter. Rather, their community exists within the existing space, careful not to brush edges with it.

A group of Syrian woman has set up a women's centre in front of Fatih Mosque to provide a space to meet and socialise. This part of town, traditionally more





conservative, has attracted the largest concentration of Syrians. The Syrian director of the women's centre arrives fresh from another meeting to discuss the changing circumstances of Syrian women in Turkey. She speaks in a businesslike manner, while doodling octagonal domed roofs on a tissue. 'Syrian women are still in shock. We don't know what will happen when women wake up from this dream'. She shoots off a list of figures - more than 100,000 Syrian women are the sole providers for their families, more than 56 percent of the Syrian women in Istanbul are educated to university level and 28 percent to high school level. Her statements are impossible to verify but she speaks with an air of unquestioned authority. The collective response of the womens' centre to displacement is to organise twice weekly coffee mornings and sessions with a University lecturer on the other side of the Bosphorus about 'success'. They also host 'strength response' sessions for women - how to say 'no', when and why, to protect from harassment. These same women are the ones who use the 'Girls in Istanbul' (صبايا اسطنبول) facebook group - a forum not only for exchanging furniture, sharing advice on schools for children, or where to find a good doctor but also where older women seek out potential brides for their sons. All of their normal physical social activities, relationships, transactions, matchmaking are being transferred into a virtual sphere.

The question Mahmood asks—how do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subject's own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of authority is a condition for achieving the subject's potentiality?[\[xvi\]](#)— is relevant for trying to unpick the manifestations of gender relations in periods of displacement. The specific challenges facing women in displacement, and the various related reconfigurations which displacement forces, also generates corresponding spaces for specific performances, and enactment of freedoms, which may shed light on what sort of political communities are being formed.

*The particular strategies which women are employing and the spaces of freedoms which they create, which are often very local, contingent, and often*



*impossible to predict, also reflect the constellation of power structures which they are existing in, contesting or reproducing.*

\* *Şevin Gülfer Sağniç contributed towards some of the research used in this article.*

[i] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories", (University of California Press, 1993), 4.

[ii] Suad Joseph, [Gender and Citizenship in Middle Eastern States](#), *Middle East Research and Information Project 198* (1996), accessed 5 February 2017.

[iii] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. (Verso, London: New York, 2004), 52.

[iv] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. (Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

[v] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

[vi] Penny Vera-Sanso, *Masculinity, Male Domestic Authority and Female Labour Participation in South India*. In (ed.) Cecile Jackson, 'Men at Work: Men, Masculinities, Development', a special issue of the *European Journal of Development Research*, 12: 2, (2000): 179-198.

[vii] Şenay Özden, "The opposition failed bitterly in the refugee issue," Interviewed by A. Çavdar, *Saha 1* (September 2016), 40-41.

[viii] Maxine Molyneux, 'Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: Progres/Oportunidades Mexico's Conditional Transfer Programme', *Social Policy and Administration* 40.4 (2006): 425-49.

[ix] [İzmir' in "Süt Kuzuları"na haftada 2 litre süt](#), 19 September 2012, İzmir



Büyükşehir Belediyesi, accessed 24 October 2016.

[x] Deborah Valenze, *Milk: a local and global history*, (Michigan: Sheridan Books, 2011) , 3.

[xi] Eleanor Careless, [The Milk Fetish](#), *The Inkling*, 12 May 2016, accessed 22 December 2016.

[xii] SLJ, [“The Right to Syrian Nationality”](#), *Syrian Law Journal*, 23 June 2016, accessed 4 February 2017.

[xiii] Sarnata Reynolds and Tori Duoos, [“A Generation of Syrians Born in Exile Risk a Future of Statelessness”](#), European Network on Statelessness, 15 July 2015, accessed 5 January 2017.

[xiv] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.

[xv] Asef Bayart, *“Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East,”* (Amsterdam University Press, 2010).

[xvi] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 31.

*Featured photo* by [Jon Rawlinson](#) (flickr, [CC BY 2.0](#))