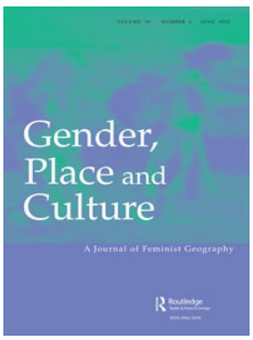

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The emerging intersectional performative gender of displaced Syrian women in southeast Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interconnection between intersectionality and gender performativity. It aims to understand how the interplay between multiple identities based on gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion and sexuality contributes to shaping different forms of gender performativity within the context of Syrians' displacement in Turkey. The article presents an analysis of interview data collected from 40 Syrian refugee women living in three southeast Turkish border cities: Gaziantep, Mardin and Sanliurfa. The research used the method of personal narrative interviewing to explore changing gender practices in the context of displacement. It is argued that the emerging gender performativity of Syrian refugee women is shaped by the intersecting of their multiple identities; the interconnection between the past and the present experiences of these identities; and the different effects of identity practices over time and place on women's lived experience and social relations.

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Displacement; gender; intersectionality; performativity; southeast Turkey; Syrian refugee women

Introduction

More than 3.5 million Syrian refugees have been displaced to Turkey since the start of the Syrian war in 2011 (UNHCR (United Nation High Commission for Refugees) 2020). Displaced Syrians in Turkey are highly diverse in terms of their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and their displacement and post-displacement experiences. The majority of them fled to cities and towns in southeast Turkey due to several reasons: their hope to return to Syria; the similarity in social and cultural norms; the existence of relatives from the same tribes, or families; and the Arab ethnic origin of many of the Turkish inhabitants of southeast border areas (Orhan 2015; Kilicaslan 2016).

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Family, sectarian, ethnic and political networks between Turks living in border southeast cities and towns and Syrians, and among Syrians themselves, were developed prior to and after displacement and have contributed significantly to regulating the patterns of life for most displaced Syrians – i.e. guaranteeing their early survival and coping in the host community, finding rental houses and jobs for each other and disseminating information on local economic conditions (Orhan 2015; Kilicaslan 2016). However, over the course of prolonged displacement, solidarity based on national, ethnic and religious identities has weakened and the collective practice of social and cultural norms, including gender, has fundamentally been disturbed (Eder and Ozkul 2016). Socio-economic vulnerability forced Syrian refugees to reconfigure their habitual gendered daily spatial practices in order to cope with the context of displacement.

Women were also driven by their families' needs to go beyond the social and physical boundaries of family networks and search for jobs in different Turkish cities (Rohwerder 2018; Korukmez, Zeynep Karakılıc, and Danıs 2020). Syrian men also often work double shifts in humiliating jobs that do not match their expertise and gender expectations (Ceritoğlu et al. 2017). With the high cost of living in Turkey, some men and women were forced to revive some gender practices that they had already abandoned in Syria prior to the war such as child labour and girls' early marriage to cope with extreme poverty (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017; Knappert et al. 2018). Some women were forced into legal or illegal prostitution to help their families survive (Terre des Hommes 2016). However, this is not the overall portrayal of displaced Syrians in southeast Turkey. There is also a group of Syrian families, albeit a minority, who have maintained better-off economic conditions after displacement and established businesses that provided jobs to a large number of vulnerable Syrian refugees in southeast Turkey (TEPAV & EBRD. 2018).

Despite diversity among Syrian refugees in Turkey, literature homogenises them as a uniform group, neglecting how differences based on gender, class, ethnicity, place of origin, religion and legal status contribute to shaping the everyday practices of Syrian refugees (Özden 2013; Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). Gender studies usually dichotomise the emerging patterns of gender practices as either negative or positive, or in other words, normative or subversive following the international discourse of gender equality (CTDC 2015; Kivilcim 2016; ODI (Overseas Development Institute) 2017). The normative pattern refers to practices that adhere to patriarchal norms – such as early marriage for girls, child labour, and restrictions against women's mobility and access to education. The subversive pattern includes spatial and social practices that challenge patriarchal gender norms – women go outside home and act autonomously, earn income and participate in decision making.

Within the context of Syrian displacement in Turkey, the binary understanding of gender practices as either normative or subversive in relation to the structure and culture of patriarchy elides the intersectionality of gender, including the effect of its historical experiences on the ways women choose to perform their gender in a different place and time (Nelson 1999; McIlwaine 2010). The intersectionality of gender and its performativity exemplified in women's bodily practice and expression is important to 'make visible the multiple positionings' that shape women's everyday lives and the unstable, fluid and overlapping practice of different identities within a particular time and place (Vaiou 2018, 581). The intersection between the practice of gender and the practice of other identities in the context of displacement also creates different goals, motivations and desires that go beyond the material effects of power (Mahmood 2005).

The interplay of intersectionality and gender performativity

Intersectionality is a theoretical and methodological approach that helps researchers to understand the multiple, multi-sited and interlayered realities and social inequalities as a gendered experience (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2006; Shields 2008). Gender does not operate independently from other identities. Rather, it interplays with them to constitute multiple, contradictory and overlapping practices, motivations and desires (Ruddick 1996; Shain 2003; Ratna 2013). Ratna (2013), for example, understood gendered performativity as 'intersectional plays of identities', which is extremely useful for analysing how different identities perform together, and simultaneously foster a sense of belonging to a particular identity over another. In her study of Asian British women footballers, she argued that Asian women footballers prioritised their race identity over their gender identity as women, and their heterosexual identity over homosexual identity as techniques of performativity that allowed them to feel accepted and included in the space of sport. Ratna draws her analysis of the women footballers' practice of their multiple identities from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. She argues that the ways women choose to prioritise their identities are not a reflection of their innate desires. Rather, their choices are made within the parameters of the social structure of power.

Judith Butler understands gender performativity as the compulsory repetition of actions and expressions that constructs culturally intelligible subjects within the hegemony of patriarchy and other discourses of power (Butler 1990). For Butler, gender is merely a norm in its practice. All aspects associated with gender, including the subject, agency, gender norm and even biological sex, are continually produced by and through discourses of power (Butler 1990, 1993). Gender for Butler is merely constituted by and through

'the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance' (Butler 1990, 25). Within the existing structure of power based on gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc., agency is exercised with each repetitive practice of norms that is, through performativity, often to reinforce those norms but also to resist them. Butler suggests that subversion occurs through the failure to repeat. This very repetitive failure to repeat normativity creates a contested subject, in which the boundaries between the inner gender (the real desired one) and the outer gender (the body that is regulated by discourses of power) become ambiguous. By this discursive practice, the person starts to feel the joy of acting differently against dominant norms that are regulated by the politics of multiple identities (Butler 1990, xxi).

Despite the importance of Butler's theory of performativity in understanding the relationship between the gendered subject and discourses of power, her theory focuses on gender identity with less attention given to how the practice of gender intersects with the practice of other identities. Her theory also regards the bias toward resistance against dominant categories of identity as proof of agency. Agency for Butler is determined by ability to repeat, recite, or re-contextualize that guarantees a failure of replications of norms. Butler's understanding of agency draws upon her belief that the desire for individual freedom from the regulatory norms of identity is a universal innate desire that motivates all people of different contexts and at all times to engage in the action of resistance. Although Butler states that her project is not to determine what form of bodily performance women take to re-signify their gender identity and desires against the dominant categories of identity, she wishes to argue for 'a sense of agency … which is able to renew the resources of the past in the direction of a future distinctly different' (Butler 1997, 138).

Literature on gender and agency challenges the dichotomy of the past and present experiences of gender, which often interconnect to shape agency and gendered subjectivity, particularly in contexts of diaspora and displacement (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2005). Literature also challenges Butler's binary assumption of accommodation and resistance of gender norms that are imposed by dominant categories of identity and their discourses of power (Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005; Frisk 2009; Oh 2009). Mahmood, in her study of religious women in Egypt, emphasized that the operation of power constructs 'different bodies, knowledge and subjectivities whose trajectories do not follow the entelechy of liberatory politics' (Mahmood 2005, 14). Pious Muslim women in Mahmood's study struggled to achieve the virtues of modesty by veiling and intentionally behaving in a shy manner, as a proof of their agency. Mahmood points out that the behaviours of pious women were part of their desired 'inhabited norms' based on the

culture of patriarchy and religion that actually structure 'the interiority' of their gendered subjectivity. Mahmood criticizes the dualistic framework of norms as either conformed or subverted by redefining norms as they can actually - besides being confirmed or subverted - also be 'inhabited, aspired, searched, and consumed' (Mahmood 2005, 23). Mahmood (2005, 15) explored the question of agency beyond the discussion of acts of subversion and consolidation to include the consideration of the multiple ways that norms are embodied in a certain historical context.

Mahmood's understanding of norms is applied in several studies. In a context of war and conflict, research shows that some women do not enjoy the reconfiguration of their normative bodily practice and the freedom of mobility that situationally emerged. Rather, they preferred to present themselves in connection to their previous experience of gender based on the virtues of patriarchy. Their return to the inhabited experiences of the past, even symbolically, provided them with a sense of belonging, protection and intimacy (Szczepanikova 2012; Muhanna 2013). A study of Ultra-Orthodox women in Israel argues that while Jewish women embodied their gender against the religious stereotype by going out to work and acting as the primary family provider, they remained adhered to their desired inhabited religious identity (Rebecca and Harel-Shalev 2020, 3). Rebecca and Harel-Shalev (2020, 5) get engaged in feminist geography by describing the home as an important place where Jewish women exercise their religious agency. These studies among many others provide sufficient evidence that gender is performed through the interconnection between the past and the present, the interplay of intersectional identities and the spatial agency (cf. Ozkaleli 2018). They also confirm that the accommodation and subversion of norms overlap each other through the exercise of agency to meet particular goals, motivations and desires that are not always associated with the interest of power. Some women may choose freely to act in line with patriarchal gender norms to meet their innate desire of being wives and mothers, or faithful to their religion.

The ways women choose to exercise their agency and shape their gender performativity are not only informed by the external forces of power that subjugate them in a particular context. They are also informed by the historical context and the various spaces and positionalities that women experience throughout their lives (Nelson 1999; Peake 2010; Hopkins 2018; Muriaas et al. 2019). Women's agency is also informed by their lived social relations over time (McNay 2004, 183). In this research, I argue that in the context of displacement, it is not the situational practices of gender (normative or subversive) that women undertake in a particular place and time that matter. Rather, it is the ways women compare the effects of their social and spatial practices of gender in the past with that in the present on their sense of selfhood in relation to others.

Within this analytical framework, this research aims to explore the interplay between intersectionality and gender performativity within the social and spatial context of displacement. It specifically aims to find an answer to the following questions: 1) How do the interplay between the experiences of gender in the past and the present and in various places; the intersectional identities based on gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion and sexuality; and the particular subjective and intersubjective experiences of Syrian refugee women contribute to shaping different forms of gender performativity in the context of displacement? 2) How does spatial displacement evoke Syrian women's motivations and desires to act against the normative-subversive gender binary? I attempted to find an answer to these questions by reflecting on the diverse emerging gendered practices as they were narrated by 40 Syrian refugee women living in southeast Turkish cities.

Research methodology and ethics

Research sites

Sanliurfa, Gaziantep and Mardin were selected as sites of research because they represent a wide range of diversity among displaced Syrians living in southeast Turkey. For example, Arab Sunni Muslims were concentrated in Sanliurfa, while Kurds and secular Arabs were more concentrated in Gaziantep and Mardin. The majority of Syrian refugees who lived in Gaziantep came from Aleppo, while most Syrian refugees who lived in Mardin and Sanliurfa came from the poorer Syrian provinces of Idlib, Raqqa, Al Hasakah and Der El Zour. Most rich and middle class professional Syrians lived in Gaziantep because it is a big commercial city and a hub for Syrian businesses and international and national humanitarian organisations working with and for Syrian refugees.

Research participants

To challenge the homogenised portrayal of Syrian refugees as poor and vulnerable, I intended to select my research participants to represent diversity in place of origin, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and political and ideological orientation. This diversity helped to illustrate how different identities intersect to shape gender performativity in the context of displacement. I used several strategies to facilitate access to my primary research participants from different backgrounds:

First, in cooperation with Syrian academics who taught Syrian refugee students in southeast Turkish universities, I conducted a pilot focus group (FG) in each site with Syrian students representing different class, ethnic, sectoral, political and ideological backgrounds. Around 15-20 men and women in the age group of 18 to 28 years were represented equally in each FG. Each

student talked briefly about his/her experience of displacement and the changes that occurred in their life afterwards. The FGs were very useful because they provided important information about diversity in class, ethnicity, place of origin and cultural attitudes among Syrian refugees. This information guided me in how to reach individual research participants. Some participants helped in facilitating interviews with their mothers, female relatives and neighbours for the purpose of this research.

Second, I purposively recruited three displaced Syrians to be my research assistants. They worked for international humanitarian organisations targeting vulnerable Syrian refugees in the three sites. The research assistants used their knowledge of vulnerable Syrian refugees to arrange a list of research participants, who came from different places of origin, sects, ethnicity and socio-economic and political backgrounds. They also relied on their personal and professional networks to arrange interviews with middle class women – those who worked in professional jobs with international and Syrian humanitarian organisations operating in the three sites.

Third, I started the field research with a few individual interviews in each site that were facilitated by Syrian refugee students and research assistants. Through snowball sampling techniques, I relied on the first group of interviewees to expand my contact with other women, who were purposively selected to represent diversity. First interviews with professional women also helped to put me in a confidential contact with women of a non-binary gender such as bisexual. Almost all research participants were accessed through personal networks amongst Syrian refugees.

Through the three strategies, I succeeded to conduct interviews with 40 displaced Syrian women: 15 in Gaziantep, 15 in Sanliurfa and 10 in Mardin. The majority of the middle class women interviewed had a high level of education and worked in senior and middle management jobs. Seventeen of the 40 respondents lived in Gaziantep and a few lived in Sanliurfa and Mardin due to their work with international organisations. Among the 40 interviewees, seven women were Kurdish and the rest were Arab Sunnis. The majority of research participants (23 out of 40) were poor and vulnerable due to their lack of education and professional skills and reliance on humanitarian aid. Research participants came from different places of origin and were aged between 24 and 46 years. The majority were married with children.

Methods

The analysis in this article draws upon data collected through Personal Narrative Interviews (PNIs) with 40 women. The method of PNIs proved to have high merit in digging into the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of experiences and dynamics of 'working out of a culture and a social

system' (Behar 1990, 225). PNI is particularly important for this research because it helps to 'explore the radical discontinuities in the lives of displaced people, as well as the struggle to make sense of disruptive change' (Eastmond 2007, 251). All PNIs were conducted at the participants' homes. The duration of each PNI varied depending on the availability and openness of the interviewees. Most interviews were conducted through two or three home visits with a duration of 1.5 to 2 hours each. Few interviews were conducted through one visit.

Ethnographic research with refugees confirms that refugees draw on researchers' questions and their conceptual implications to decide what to say and what to ignore (Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007; Block et al. 2013). Therefore, I designed a broad research question to be the subject for my research investigation: *'can you please tell me how your style of life after the war and displacement has changed from your style of life before the war?* The use of such a broad question, that does not focus on a single topic or aspect of women's lives, helped to reveal how participants experience and think of many influences on their lives and social relations (Flick 2006). Through this question, women were expected to frame their narratives within the interconnection between the present and the past experiences of life in a way that evokes particular memories and desires for the future. Not mentioning the concept of gender, or identity, in the research question does not entail a deceptive, or unethical act (Virtová et al. 2018) because all aspects of women's life in the present and the past are presumably gendered. Without intervening in the structure and the flow of women's narratives, I asked sub-questions seeking further clarification.

Research ethics

The research obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself, my institutional affiliation, my broad interview question and how women's narratives will be used. I also introduced myself as a Palestinian woman originating from the Gaza Strip and briefly disclosed some of my experience of living in war and conflict situations and being a refugee in the UK. Sharing my personal experience as a Palestinian refugee created a sense of familiarity and intimacy during the interviews. I did not encounter any refusal to participate in the interviews or to having them recorded. Most research participants welcomed me, talked intimately, provided food and drinks and spoke openly about sensitive personal issues. Beside receiving verbal consent to conduct and record the interviews, I assured the research participants that their real names will not

appear in any publications, or be used by any other researchers or institutions. Therefore, all names included in this text are pseudonyms.

Empirical analysis and discussion

The narratives of the forty interviewed displaced Syrian women show a high level of diversity. In their narratives, Syrian women described being subject to different experiences, memories, passions, and desires. To facilitate the analysis and discussion in this section, I put women's narratives into three categories of gender performativity based on differences in their class, ethnicity, education, employment, sexuality, politics and subjective and intersubjective experiences. Nonetheless, I realise that the three categories overlap with each other, reflecting common experiences of certain identities in the past and the present. I also realise that the three forms of gender performativity are not linear. Each goes back and forth in subversive and conformist ways in response to the changing circumstances. However, the categorization is based on how women primarily present themselves in terms of their adherence to Syrian traditions, or cultural ideals.

Category one: the conformist form of gender performativity

Conformist gender performativity appears more common among women who came from wealthy, middle class and Arab Sunni Muslim families. Most of them fled from Aleppo and a very few from Deir Al Zour, Al Hasaka, Raqqa and Idlib, the poorer provinces in Syria. Ten out of the forty research participants belong to this category: six lived in Gaziantep, three in Sanliurfa and one in Mardin. These women stated that they follow the mainstream moderate Islamic tradition that was practiced in Syria prior to the war and some expressed their belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideology. The majority were middle class married women, some were housewives married to businessmen, and others worked as teachers and in administrative jobs. Some interviewees mentioned that they also relied on remittances from their relatives working in Gulf countries.

One of the major issues that surfaced in the discussion with this group of women was their feeling of disappointment and annoyance at the wrongdoings practiced by a group of displaced Syrian refugees, particularly women. According to their narratives, these wrongdoings have significantly distorted the reputation of good Syrian women. A teacher from Gaziantep who worked in one of the Syrian Temporary Education Centres that the Turkish government opened for Syrian refugee students said:

> We have become ashamed of the wrongdoing of a small group of Syrian refugees. Some act like Europeans, where single young men and women live in the same

> house together with no marriage. Some others, especially the poor, sell their daughters to old Turkish married men, or rich Arabs, and send their children for begging. These are not our Syrian traditions.

Some interviewees mentioned that they deliberately distanced themselves and their children from both Syrians and Turkish people in order to avoid being labelled as bad Syrians by Turkish people. A woman from Sanliurfa noted: 'some Syrians have disappointed us.' Another woman from Gaziantep said: 'we have become a victim of a small group of Syrian refugee men and women who misbehave, but we are not all the same.' A middle-aged woman from Gaziantep also said: 'those few Syrians made us not feeling safe to send our daughters to school, or to work because Turkish people would think of them in a bad way, and may harass them.'

Women of this group were keen to present themselves within the symbolic authority of patriarchal, national and religious norms that used to collectively regulate the day-to-day life of Syrians prior to the war. A middle-aged woman from Aleppo residing in Sanliurfa said: 'displacement should not change us … see how Turkish people think of us, as beggars and cheap. This is because some abandoned their tradition and religion.' The commitment of this group to what they call *a'adat we taqaleed* (traditions) is demonstrated in maintaining their traditional and religious dress, the regular practice of their religion, and keeping traditional patterns of marriage from within the same family and class. Still, the narratives of gender performativity amongst the interviewees are not identical due to differences in education, employment and previous experiences of gender.

Salma is a 28-year old wife who fled from Idlib to Gaziantep. She has a PhD and used to work as a lecturer in a Syrian university prior to the war. During the interview, she was working as a coordinator in a project supporting the victims of gender-based violence. She was critical of the gender equality approach used by international organisations and thought that it exacerbates violence and tension within the Syrian family. She said: 'despite the tremendous changes that Syrian women made in their daily behaviours and appearance, I remained the same and I don't want to change because I am happy with who I am.' Salma refers her adherence to Syrian traditions to her particular experience of gender. She said:

> I grew up in a religious family that did not compel girls to act against their will. I and my sisters were given the right to complete our universities, work, choose our husbands and interact with people around us and at the same time we have remained committed to our traditions and religion. Our tradition is not always oppressive.

Salma admitted that her style of life today is different to her style of life in Syria. However, she confirmed that this change is temporal and does not affect her normative image of gender. She said:

> Although I am currently acting as the primary provider of my family because my husband could not find a job, I don't feel happy about that. The best way to avoid tension in the family is for a man to fulfil his role. If women want to go on with their work, it is fine, but not to replace men's role. This is not based on a dogmatic understanding of Islam, but reflects on my own experience and the experience of other women who I know.

Another educated woman from Gaziantep, who works as a teacher, focused on her Syrian and religious identities to signify her ideal image of gender. She said:

> I am not saying women should not help their husbands in the current difficult situation, but not to exceed the limit. We are Syrians and have to respect our Syrian traditions and commit to our religion.

Housewives' narratives appear more conformist than those of educated and employed women. A housewife with little education from Sanliurfa said:

> I heard Syrian women divorced their husbands because they don't work and they remarried rich men. This is shame of a Syrian woman to do so. We, Syrian women, have been nurtured on the virtue of self-sacrifice. A good woman is the one who stands beside her husband in a harsh situation.

The major issue that disturbed women of this group was the rumour about Syrian women who have gone into the path of prostitution. In an attempt to idealise the image of Syrian Islamic Arab identities, most interviewed women interpreted this behaviour by intersecting the gender embodiment with class, ethnic identity and place of origin. A housewife in her mid-40s from Aleppo and residing in Gaziantep said:

> Prostitution must be undertaken by the displaced Syrian Nawar (called "gypsies" in English). They are different from us (Arab Muslims). They are nomadic relying on women's work. There is nothing to do with displacement.

A housewife in her late 20 s from Deir Al Zour and residing in Mardin said:

> Most women doing prostitution here are those who used to do it in Syria. They may also come from poor Syrian provinces such as Raqqa. A good Syrian Muslim woman remains good, wherever she goes.

This group of women believed that conforming to Syrian tradition and religion, or re-appropriating such norms to a certain degree, is more protective for women in the context of displacement than subverting them. Salma reflected on her work experience with Syrian women victims of violence, saying: 'If Syrian women do not draw their behaviours based on the beliefs and values that they inhabited in Syria prior to the war, they will remain lost.' By saying that, Salma's narrative goes beyond the material effects of power that exploit women and force them to 'misbehave' and gives emphasis to the inhabited moral values and beliefs based on Syrian traditions and religion that have the potential to protect them. Reflecting on her lived gendered

experience both in Syria and Gaziantep, Salma indicated that adherence to tradition and religion 'is not always oppressive.'

Within the context of displacement, women of this group reflected on their lived experiences of identities in the past and present and in various places and chose to remain adherent to their Syrian traditions and religion. Their conformity was motivated by their sense of belonging to their place of origin and desired identities as Syrian, Arab, Muslim women. However, conformity to traditions and religion does not prevent this group re-appropriating, or subverting their social and spatial practices of gender for functional purposes in the context of displacement (Nelson 1999, 350).

Category two: Subversive gender performativity

I interviewed seven women who primarily narrated their gender performativity as subversive. They defined themselves as 'liberal women' representing Syrian and Kurdish liberal political parties, who do not believe themselves to be adherent to gender stereotypes in both Syria and Turkey. The majority of these women fled from Deir el Zour, Al-Hasaka, Idlib, and Raqqa and a few from Aleppo and Damascus. They all lived in Gaziantep, except one who lived in Mardin. Most of them were highly educated and came from middle class Arab and Kurdish families (lawyers, doctors, teachers and some Masters and PhD students in Syrian universities). The seven interviewees worked in middle to senior management jobs with the Syrian cross-border humanitarian organisations, or as teachers in the Syrian Temporary Education Centres. All of them were in their late 20 s and early 30 s. Some were married and others were single.

Although women of this group present themselves as following their desire for self-identity (Butler 1990, 1993), their narratives show differences in the ways they operationalised their self-identity in public. While Kurdish women were firm with the presentation and practice of their identity as liberal feminists, Arab women were more flexible in operationalizing the same identity. A Kurdish woman from Mardin said: 'We are free here in Turkey to do anything we want compared to Syria. No one counts what I do and what I say, no one has a power over me.' An Arab woman said:

> I am a Syrian political figure here. I am radically liberal in my thought and desires but I can't do everything I like to do because I don't want to lose my constituents. So, when I am in public places, I adhere to traditions to maintain people's respect. That does not bother me or change who I am.

Within this group, I managed to interview a bisexual woman, Sahar. Her place of origin and of residence in Southeast Turkey is not given to protect the confidentiality of her sexual identity. As she describes, she grew up in a

liberal Arab family, who had never put restrictions on her. She had a Master's degree and worked in a professional job. In the first visit to Sahar's home, where she lived on her own, she said:

> I have not actually changed so much by my displacement to Turkey. What has actually changed is that I removed the mask. I and my friends do not belong to the normative social system. Syrian men and women like me here are few. We go to the same places, we smoke weed, drink alcohol and make sex, and we don't care how other people think of us. Why should we? This is our life.

In the following two interviews with Sahar, she opened up, talking more about her personal and familial experiences in Syria prior to the war and in Turkey. She referred in her narrative to the painful experience of her divorced parents that made her hate the heterosexual institution of marriage. She also criticised the hypocrisy of her liberal fellows, 'who live with double-face.' Her subversive gender performativity, through the act of bisexuality, does not appear as merely a spontaneous response to her inner desire for freedom against heterosexuality and the dominant discourses of power that are imposed on women. It is also a reflection of her particular life experiences and intersubjective relations that actually structure 'the interiority' of her gendered subjectivity (Mahmood 2005, 23). Her interiority informed her to rethink her bisexual identity in the context of displacement. She said:

> I am not sure why things do not work with me (she here refers to her intimate relations with men and women). Am I wrong, or are people around me wrong? Sometimes I think of marriage and stability, like my sisters. My mother really wants me to be married, but she does not force me to do so.

The self-contestation that Sahar narrated is influenced by her assessment of the effect of her performativity as bisexual in the context of displacement. Her bad experience of acting as a bisexual evoked her familial experience of heterosexuality. Sahar's narrative challenges the binary understanding of sexuality that heterosexuality is an achievement that forecloses homosexual desire (Butler 1993). Sahar experienced both homosexuality and heterosexuality and she is still questioning, as well as negotiating, which one may bring her the intimacy that she desires.

The performative act, or agency, among this group is self-reflective, intentional and relational. Unlike Kurdish women, Arab women consider the dimensions of relationality and place to either re-appropriate the practice of their liberal self-identity for a functional purpose (Nelson 1999), or question their subversive sexual identity as a whole. These practices mean that normative identities that represent patriarchy and heterosexuality are not simply understood as 'a question of positioning within discourses of power.' They should also be seen as 'a lived social relation that necessarily involves the

negotiation of conflict and tension,' responding to the changing place and time (McNay 2004, 185).

Category three: Interweaving between conformity and subversion

The majority of the interviewed women (23 women out of 40) narrated their experiences of gender performativity within the category of interweaving between conformity to and subversion of dominant gender norms. The majority of them were economically and socially vulnerable and reliant on humanitarian aid. Most of them had low education and came from poor neighbourhoods of Aleppo and the Syrian eastern provinces of Raqqa, Deir Al Zour and Al Hasaka. Some of them had a decent standard of living prior to the Syrian war but they lost everything due to the war and displacement. The gender performativity of this group overlaps with the other two categories mentioned above in terms of the interplay of intersectional identities. However, they are categorised separately due to their ability to interweave between adherence to their inhabited norms based on their national, ethnic, religious and marital identities and subversion of these norms to achieve particular goals. Unlike the first two groups of women who were socially and economically better off, this group of women was influenced by poverty and inability to secure the livelihood of their families to shape fluid and contradictory gender practices. They flexibly and subtly move back and forth between conformist and subversive actions to meet certain goals, motivations and desires. I selected three narratives, which cover a wide range of diversity in gender practices narrated by other women belonging to this group. I also selected three narratives that include more details about the sequence of events that justifies the fluidity in their gender performativity.

Um salma's narrative

Um Salma fled with her family from a poor suburb of Aleppo to Mardin in 2014. She was an uneducated married woman aged 34 years with four children. Um Salma was a housewife who '… never worked outside home.' She dressed in the Aleppo traditional *khemar* (face cover) and her mobility was restricted within the family boundaries. Despite her poverty before displacement, she described her life in Syria thus: 'it was beautiful, going on with no troubles. My husband worked so hard to manage our livelihood and I was a housewife.' Her husband had failed to find a job in Mardin. Um Salma was forced to look for jobs to support her family, but 'what jobs would be available for an uneducated woman, like me. It is cleaning in people's houses.' This job for Um Salma is '*mazalla*' (humiliating), 'but I have to feed my children.' After displacement, Um Salma became the primary family provider

and her husband, as she described, 'became depressed and not involved in any decision for the family.'

For more than two years, Um Salma rejected to marry off her daughter to those who came to ask for her hand, including Turkish men, because she had a hope to return to her normal life in Syria. The continuous vulnerability of her family has made Um Salma compromise the cultural ideal and agree to marry off her daughter to a 20-year old man from Al-Hasaka, which is a multi-ethnic province located in north-east Syria composed of Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians and Armenians. According to marriage patterns in Aleppo, marrying off an Aleppo girl to someone from Al-Hasaka is not culturally accepted because 'Al-Hasaka's people are so open and not religious like in Aleppo.' Um Salma went beyond these traditions and justified her daughter's marriage by saying: 'we are all displaced Syrians living in the same conditions. Marriage brings us closer to each other.' Unfortunately, this marriage only lasted for 10 months and ended in divorce.

Luckily, four months after her divorce, a single Syrian man from the same place of origin, Aleppo, asked for the daughter's hand. Um Salma intersects the place of origin with religion to praise this marriage, saying:

> We are lucky. The new husband is religious. He works and can protect her. He only asked her to put the *khemar* back. That was fine, we used to put the *khemar* in Aleppo and we removed it here in order to cope with the society in Mardin.

Um Abdellah's narrative

Um Abdellah is a 30-year-old woman originally from Raqqa. After her husband died in an aerial bombardment, she fled to Gaziantep with her three children in early 2016. Prior to the war, she was working as a teacher in a religious private school and her husband owned a stationery shop. She studied *Sharia* in Syria and chose at an early age to wear the *niqab* (religious face cover) in Syria. Um Abdellah searched for a job related to her degree in *Sharia* for three months but did not succeed to find one. She lost the hope to find a suitable job and started to accept doing anything that brings a little money to support her family. She first removed the *niqab* because she realised that it was a constraint to finding a job. Then, she accepted to work as a cleaner. She said: 'I did everything that I have never expected myself to do. What else can I do to support my family without compromising my dignity?' 'Dignity' here signifies the moral limit of her gender performativity. Despite all her activities that subverted the dominant gender norms that she inhabited throughout her life in Syria prior to the war, Um Abdellah has remained unable to live with dignity. As she said: 'I am even unable to pay the rent on time, which may lead me and my children to sleep in the street.'

Replying to my question of how she feels about herself in the current circumstances, she replied:

> I was a teacher in Syria and now a cleaner. How do you think I feel about myself? I am not myself. My body is here but my soul is still there in Syria. I hope one day to return to my normal life in Syria.

Samah's narrative

Samah is a 26-year old woman who fled from Aleppo to Gaziantep in 2013. She was married with four children when she left Aleppo. Samah had a very difficult childhood and lived her life prior to the war in a socially and culturally troubled and poor family. Her father forced her to drop out of school and work with her mother, as a cleaner, when she was 12. Samah described herself as 'rebellious.' She decided on her own to marry to escape her father, whom she described as 'brutal.' Unfortunately, her choice of marriage reproduced her misery by having an unreliable husband who failed to protect her from the bad treatment of her mother-in-law. To confirm her performative agency, Samah said: 'I was able to take a decision to divorce, but I chose not to because I did not want to hurt my children.'

Because of the war, Samah fled with her husband and children to Gaziantep. Her husband could not cope in Gaziantep and decided to go back to Aleppo. He asked her to go back with him and she refused. Her husband insisted and without telling her, he escaped with his four children back to Aleppo. She did the best to bring her children back, but she failed to do so. Samah got divorced and her life has taken another trajectory in Turkey.

She invested in the freedom she gained by her displacement and her divorce to reshape her life. She soon found a job in a Turkish factory and she started to learn the Turkish language. Shortly, she removed the traditional Aleppo dress and fell in love with her Turkish married employer. He asked her for marriage through a *Sheikh* (religious marriage). She agreed without knowing that polygamous marriage is illegal in Turkey. The goal and motivation behind Samah's choice were '… to marry a man who protects me.' She accepted not to be paid dowry or bought a spousal house, according to the dominant marriage norms in Syria. The husband used to come to see her once a week in her mother's house. Samah's mother used to blame her for not gaining anything from the marriage, saying to her daughter: 'you are a non-paid bitch.' A few months later, Samah's marriage with her employer ran into difficulties and broke up. She continued to attempt to meet her goal of finding a husband by accepting to be with a 63-year old Turkish widower. She did so with the aim of having a legal marriage, but unfortunately the relationship soon broke up.

With this particular experience, Samah had the potential to go into the path of prostitution through her relations and networks with men and women working in this field. She said: 'no one bothers what I do. My mother divorced my father and got married with her cousin and my father does not care.' Within this precarious life, Samah coincidentally met a middle-aged Turkish Muslim woman who helped her to find a job and treated her like a daughter. As a result of this unexpected relationship, Samah changed her behaviours to become more committed to cultural norms in Gaziantep, dressing modestly and stopping going out with strange men. She also succeeded to reconnect with her children after 4 years through Facebook. When asked about what she hopes for in life after this harsh experience, Samah said:

> I lived my entire life hoping to have a stable family with a good husband and children. All I want now is to bring my children back and dedicate the rest of my life for them. This is the only thing that brings my soul back to me. You know, I am a mother.

These three narratives show that women of this group have a high level of agency that was exercised beyond the binary of consolidation and subversion of gender norms (Mahmood 2005, 15). They flexibly accommodate and subvert gender norms by intersecting their identities based on their place of origin, nationality, ethnicity, religion and marital status to meet material and non-material goals and desires. The boundaries between the culturally normative and non-normative practices appear ambiguous and fluctuating depending on which practice generates a sense of protection, as well as emotional aspiration. For example, although Um Salma justified her subversion of cultural norms in the first marriage of her daughter by intersecting gender with nationality, she prioritised her identities based on place of origin and religion over nationality to praise her daughter's second marriage. Um Abdellah felt undignified by the changes she made in her bodily performance, namely removing the *neqab* and working as a cleaner. This feeling evoked her memory of the dignified experience of gender in Syria prior to the war. It is not simply the discourses of power that inform Um Salma and Um Abdellah of the image of gender to which they aspire. Rather, it is their lived experiences over time and place and the effects of these experiences to meet their material goals and emotional desires (Nelson 1999; McNay 2004). For Samah, wifehood and motherhood are narrated as the signifiers of her agency and gender identity regardless of her several failures to embody them. She invested in her unexpected relation with the Turkish Muslim woman to negotiate the contested elements of her multiple identities and chose the identity that suited her innate desire. Motherhood structured Samah's gendered interiority that she has historically habituated over time

and place (Mahmood 2005). Motherhood, as Samah said, brings her soul back to her.

Conclusion

The narratives of Syrian refugee women confirm that gender performativity is intersectional and shaped by the interweaving between the normative and subversive practices of dominant categories of identities; the interconnection between the past and the present experiences of identities, including gender; and the inhabited interiority of gendered subjectivity that unconsciously regulates women's practices. More specifically, the findings of this research also show that place of origin plays an important role in informing Syrian women of the image of gender to which they aspire. Following feminist geographers, the intersectionality of gender performativity in the context of displacement is significantly 'bound up in spatialities' (Peake 2010, 65).

This research also shows that the understanding of gender performativity as only identified through repetition of actions and expressions shaped by discourses of power within the context of displacement denies women's ability to remember who they were in the previous place and imagine who they want to be in the new one. Women reflect through their narratives the way they experience the present, as well as the way they mentally, morally and emotionally organise their sense of the past experiences of identities. Through their narratives, they become subject to different experiences, memories, passions, and desires that shape their favourable ways of acting their gender in a certain time and place.

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