



## **Syrian men's disability and their masculine trajectories in the context of displacement in Jordan and Turkey**

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# **Syrian Men's Disability and Their Masculine Trajectories in The Context of Displacement in Jordan and Turkey**

## **Abstract**

This article analyses the relationship between men's physical disability and the trajectories of negotiating masculinities in the context of Syrian refugee displacement in Jordan and Turkey. The article draws its analysis from the personal narratives of five displaced Syrian refugee men who sustained injuries during the war in Syria. It explores how Syrian refugee men with disabilities remake their masculine bodies and selves to create a new version of masculinity that responds to the changes in their socio-economic circumstances and bodies. The paper argues that the disabled Syrian refugee men went through multiple and contradictory masculine trajectories that intersect with multiple identities and different types of disability. Disabled Syrian refugee men's emergent masculine embodiments created a version of masculinity that, although it adhered to the patriarchal family values of connectivity and intimacy, does not in its practice legitimate domination within the family and in the Syrian refugee community.

**Key words** displacement, Syrian refugee men, disability, masculinities

This article studies the masculinities of disabled Syrian refugee men within the wider context of displaced Syrian refugee men's vulnerability in Jordan and Turkey. The context of displacement and refugeehood intersects with the context of disability to define the masculine trajectories of disabled Syrian refugee men. The majority of Syrian refugee men who fled to Jordan and Turkey have experienced a serious disturbance in their normative masculine performance in terms of their socio-economic capacity to provide for their families (Knappert et al. 2017; Turner 2016, 2019). Although men's disability multiplies their vulnerability, it may provoke them to negotiate the different elements of their masculinities in order to embrace new visions of masculine selfhood. However, the process of negotiating the diverse elements of masculinities in a context in which men's displacement is associated with disability is unlikely to be straightforward and coherent in its trajectories and outcomes.

This article draws its analysis on the understanding of masculinities as plural, multiple, contradictory and fluidly and heterogeneously constructed and reconstructed due to the changing historical context and physicality (Inhorn 2012; Ghannam 2013; Wentzel 2013; Hasso 2018; Suerbaum 2018 a and b). The research aims to explore how displaced Syrian refugee men rework

their bodies and selves to respond to the unexpected changes, as well as the ways in which they resolve the contestation created between the historically habituated masculine selfhood and their present reality. The research also examines how the new version of masculinities that has emerged among disabled Syrian refugees is morally and emotionally connected with and inspired by their historical experiences of heteronormative embodiment of masculinities prior to the war in Syria. In this article, I pay close attention to understanding and analysing the emotional and moral embodiments of masculinity among disabled Syrian refugee men and how these embodiments are influenced by intersectional identities based on class, ethnicity, marital status, age, religion, refugeehood, level of disability and different personalities. The significance of this research is that it makes an important contribution to the scarce literature on the relation of disability to masculinity in the context of displacement and refugeehood. It also contributes to challenging the humanitarian gender discourse that associates masculinities of refugees with the traits of emotionlessness, domination, aggression, and trouble-making and inevitably associates masculinities with men's physicality.

This article is part of a bigger research project on gendering the resilience of vulnerable displaced Syrian refugee men and women in Jordan and Turkey. Within the periods April to June 2017 and December 2017 to April 2018, personal narrative interviews were conducted with 60 Syrian refugee men, 30 men in each country. The research participants, of different ages, education, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds, fled to Jordan and Turkey during the Syrian war. Fifteen out of the 60 research participants who are in the age group of 26 to 47 are physically disabled or sick, albeit with different degrees of disability ranging between mild and severe. They came from different places of origin in Syria and had different socio-economic backgrounds prior to the war. The fifteen interviewed disabled men were married with or without children, except two single men.

The idea of researching the masculinities of disabled men emerged during the field research and was evoked by how a group of interviewed Syrian refugee women presented their disabled husbands and sons as dependent on them for care and family provision. I was aware that some wives may have presented their disabled husbands as passive and dependent assuming that this may open an opportunity for additional humanitarian assistance for the family. I became more enthusiastic to research the masculinities of disabled men when wives and mothers invited me to interview their husbands and sons at home. Access to disabled Syrian men in Turkey and Jordan was organised by wives and mothers whom I interviewed earlier and with whom I had built trust and good relationships. Wives and mothers introduced the research idea to their husbands first and obtained their permission to invite me to their homes for interviews. Beyond the possible material benefit behind wives' efforts to facilitate the interviews with their disabled husbands and sons, some wives also thought of the possible empowering impact of interviewing their disabled husbands. One wife said: "The interview may lift up my husband's mood." Another wife said: "my husband will feel good to be interviewed like other Syrian refugee men." This motive may be the reason why some wives voluntarily opted to make themselves engaged with other household affairs and not to be present during the interviews to let their husbands speak openly about their personal experiences. Accessing disabled refugee men through their wives created a comfortable atmosphere and trust because disabled men perceived the interviews as part of socialisation with the whole family.

I used the Personal Narrative Interviewing (PNI) method during the field research. The PNI with disabled men had a great merit to "explore the radical discontinuities" in their normative masculine practices, as well as their agency "to make sense of disruptive change" on their sense of masculinities (Eastmond 2007, 251). During the PNIs, I asked one general question: "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?" During the interviews, I intervened to elicit further clarification, or interpretation,

by asking sub-questions. Disabled men were asked the same broader question as able-bodied Syrian refugee men and women. I tried to avoid mentioning their disability, as part of the core question of research, to avoid embarrassment or invoking pain and suffering. In the interviews, disabled men felt free to narrate and interpret their experiences of disability, displacement and vulnerability in whatever way they wanted. In the PNIs, disabled men did not narrate events and practices as they had occurred in sequence. Rather, they interweaved between the past and the present experiences; the good and bad memories; the emotions of faithfulness, anger and weakness; and competing views of self and others.

In this paper, I only refer to the detailed personal narratives of five out of the 15 research participants with disabilities whose personal narratives appear to a large extent representative of the diversity among the other ten participants. I did not select the five men's narratives for the sake of generalization. Rather, I use them as an example of how masculinities dynamically operate in a situation of male physical disability and displacement, and one which challenges any fixed, or singular, understanding of masculinities.

### **Masculinities in Broader Literature**

Since the 1990s, global multi-disciplinary literature has undertaken a tremendous shift in conceptualising masculinities. Masculinity is no longer understood as a universal singular concept with a fixed set of traits, or as a fixed set of typologies merely defined in relation to the question of power based on gender, class, race, ethnicity or any other factors of power. The prevalent notion of hegemonic masculinity as a constant representation of the ideology and structure of patriarchy and domination and as a rigid configuration of gender practices (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1995) has been empirically invalidated worldwide. Scholars have also realised that thinking about masculinities in terms of a hegemonic model has itself become hegemonic (Seidler 2007, 11) and "obscures the

lived reality of different forms of masculinity as ever-changing social strategies enacted through practice” (Inhorn 2012, 45).

Broader scholarship on masculinities has come up with different theoretical approaches to challenge the binaries, rigidity and singularity of masculinity and its inevitable association with social embodiment. The American sociologist Eric Anderson uses the term “inclusive masculinity” as an approach to understand masculinity as not rigid and constant. In inclusive masculinity, men change their image of masculine selfhood and performance of bodies due to changes in societies, which gradually lead to undermining traditional hegemonic masculinity associated with ideal macho masculinity (Anderson 2008). The sociologists Bridges and Pascoe (2014) use the term “hybrid masculinities” to refer to men’s selective and dynamic incorporation into their gender performances of identity elements associated with subordinated and marginalized masculinities, as well as with femininities. Demetriou (2001), Hearn (2004), and Beasley (2008) criticise the essential association of hegemonic masculinities with institutional power and a rigid set of dominant practices. Demetriou argues that men combine “bits and pieces” of different gender performances into their own performance of masculinity (Demetriou 2001, 350).

Early literature associated masculinities with physicality and social embodiment because masculinity was seen as always proceeding from men’s bodies so that it “cannot be sustained - for instance, as a result of physical disability or impairment” (Connell 1995, 54). Medical anthropologist Emily Wentzel challenges the inevitable link between masculinity and physicality. In her study of sick and old Mexican men, she uses the term “composite masculinities” to explain how men who suffered from sexual dysfunction and ageing revised their hegemonic masculine traits by replacing their concern with their sexual performance with becoming more socially and emotionally connected to their families. Wentzell (2013, 163) defines composite masculinities as “contingent and fluid constellation of elements that men weave together into masculine selfhoods.” In a different vein,

Zoë Hamilton Wool (2011), in her study of the masculinities of disabled American veterans who were injured during the Iraqi war, explores how disabled American men return in part to sexualized masculinity – having a loving female partner - as a way to resist being seen as dependent, or childlike (Wool 2011, 269). These studies confirm that masculinities are not constant but take multiple and contradictory trajectories. Men with disabilities masculinize and re-masculinize themselves heterogeneously in response to the changing context and body. However, their masculinization does not necessarily alter a dominant culture, but appropriates its practice to the changing context and body in order to restore a sense of masculine selfhood. Scholarship also confirms that masculinities and disabilities are intersectional, through which the construction of disabled men’s masculinities are affected differently by the different types and degrees of disability and a range of other intersecting identities such as class, ethnicity, race, religion and nationality (Shuttleworth et al. 2012, 188).

### **Masculinities, Refugeehood and Disability in the Middle East**

Literature on masculinities in the Middle East has been influenced by the shift in global literature. Masculinities in the Middle East are understood and analysed based on how they were and are experienced within the changing historical context of each country and within its diverse structures and cultures (Hasso 2018). Middle Eastern men, like those everywhere else, do not shape their masculinities in linear trajectories but in a process that brings together multiple, overlapping and contradictory intersectional elements of masculinities (Inhorn 2012; Ghannam 2013; Naguib 2015; Erkol 2015; Inhorn and Isidoros 2018; Suerbaum 2018 a and b). These trajectories, as stated by Farha Ghannam (2013, 167) in her study of Egyptian men, are not “clearly defined, predetermined, or guaranteed” but are shaped by “the interplay between individuals’ lives and experiences.” For Ghannam, masculine trajectories are ambiguous and contradictory and are not regulated by a singular set of ideals, norms and values. The construction of masculinities is historical and contextual

and defined in relation to men's vulnerabilities, dependences, "frustrations, achievements, failures, and successes" (2013, 170).

Ghannam's understanding of masculinities is cited in several papers on the masculinities of Arab refugee men. Arab refugee men's performances of gender are diverse and constantly in flux in response to the context of refugeehood (Achilli 2015; Suerbaum 2018 a and b; Ingvars and Gislason 2018; Turner 2019). Achilli (2015) and Turner (2019) challenge the singular understanding of hegemonic masculinity among Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Jordan that portrays refugees as always powerful, independent and assertive. They both confirm that the singular portrayal of refugees' masculinity overlooks the actuality of their lives, their vulnerability and powerlessness. Achilli, in his attempt to emphasize the limitation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, argues that Palestinian refugees in Jordan were neither able to assert the hegemonic masculinity nor able to challenge their subordination and marginalisation in the context of diaspora. Their attempts "to reconcile diverse ideals of masculinity is a deeply fragile project in which men frequently experience failures, frustrations, and setbacks" (Achilli 2015, 274). Magdalena Suerbaum (2018a), in her study of middle class Syrian refugees in Egypt, asserts that Syrian refugees' traditional representations of hegemonic masculinity based on patriarchal culture were actually in conflict with their lived reality in Egypt. Referring to their class background, they masculinized themselves by distancing themselves from the refugee label to resist its inferior positionality.

The essential association between masculinities and physicality in the Middle East is also challenged. Marcia Inhorn (2012), in her study of infertile Arab men, challenges the understanding of masculinity as determined by men's fertility, or reproductive capacity. She gives an example of "emergent masculinities" whereby infertile Arab men used their experiences of changing reproductive and sexual health to live out manliness in new ways that diverge from stereotypes. In his study of disabled veterans of Turkey's Kurdish war, Salih Can Açiksöz studied a different



dimension of masculinities in relation to disability. While the Turkish government ultranationalist discourse labelled disabled veterans as “sacrificial heroes”, distinct and separate from ordinary disabled people for the purpose of political mobilization, disabled veterans confronted socioeconomic marginalization and emasculation due to the cultural stigma of disability. In their everyday lives, Turkish disabled veterans masculinized themselves by dissociating themselves from the larger disabled community, even when they shared the same socio-economic problems. This dynamic of masculinization created “a double life” for Turkish disabled veterans (Aciksoz 2014, 251-3).

These different studies of masculinities of able-bodied and disabled men worldwide and in the Middle East confirm that masculinities are discursively negotiated and renegotiated in response to the changing socio-economic and physical circumstances. They are also affected by intersectional identities based on class, nationality, ethnicity, refugeehood, age, type of disability, etc. and the ways these different identities are subjectively and inter-subjectively experienced throughout men’s life courses. Masculinities are constructed in overlapping trajectories, through which multiple and competing elements of masculinities interweave with contingent outcomes. This conceptualization of masculinities is used to understand and analyze disabled Syrian refugee men’s experiences of masculinities, with close attention given to their emotional and moral masculine embodiments in the particular context of displacement in Jordan and Turkey.

### **Research Context**

Through the Syrian war, Syrian refugee men have been exposed to several masculine “becomings”: victimized by the war due to imprisonment, torture and bombardment; marginalized by their displacement and socio-economic vulnerability and subordinated by their refugeehood and disability. Although many Syrian refugee men were marginalized and subordinated due to their class, ethnic and sectarian backgrounds before the war, the latter, along with displacement and disability

added more elements to their marginalization and subordination. According to literature on Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey, gender has been reconfigured, particularly among the most vulnerable Syrian refugee families, in which women take over the economic responsibilities of providing for the family through reliance on humanitarian aid or working in menial jobs, while the majority of able-bodied men either do irregular jobs in the informal sector, or are jobless and also reliant on humanitarian assistance (Knappert et al. 2017; Turner 2016).

Data on displaced Syrian refugees with disabilities in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey shows that 22% of the displaced Syrian refugees have an impairment (Curtis and Geagan 2016, 21). Another recent survey conducted in Southeast Turkey found that 12.4% of refugee households had a household member with a disability, while 31% had a household member living with chronic illness (IOM 2017). The HelpAge and Handicap International survey conducted about displaced Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon in 2014 shows that men constitute 72% of the injured people, while women constitute 28%. The greatest level of injury is found among men aged 30 to 50. The report notes that working-age men are more exposed to injuries because men were more involved in war as combatants and also took risks associated with their responsibilities of providing for the family.

The vulnerability of Syrian refugee men with disabilities is much greater than that of able bodied Syrian refugee men. The majority of Syrian refugees with disabilities live in poor urban neighbourhoods, and therefore, are invisible to service providers. They live in poor housing conditions that are not suitable for people with disabilities. Transport is often inaccessible and refugees with disabilities face discrimination when trying to use public transport (Crock et al. 2015). In Turkey, some Turkish employers and shop owners also refuse to employ Syrian men with disabilities due to disability-related stigma (Curtis and Geagan 2016, 13). This deprives men with minor disabilities from adequately providing for their families, and leaves men with severe disability

completely excluded. Studies also confirm that due to lack of funds for humanitarian assistance, Syrian refugees with disabilities rely basically on their families for care and support, which make them feel guilty and frustrated by their dependence on family members (Crock et al. 2015, 55).

The vulnerability of Syrian refugee men in general, and disabled refugee men in particular, is not only caused by the insufficiency of funds to provide the basic services. It is also worsened by the gender discourse of humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees. Despite the considerable number of studies that explored the vulnerability of displaced Syrian refugee men (able-bodied and disabled) (Turner 2016; Barbelet 2017; Sonmez 2017), international humanitarian organizations continue to label Syrian refugee women and children as the most vulnerable victims of war and displacement due to the dominant patriarchal structure and culture (UNWomen 2013), while Syrian men are perceived as “independent and agential” (Turner 2019, 14). Syrian refugee women are perceived as the target of humanitarian intervention aiming to empower them to resist their traditional patriarchal culture, male domination, and the hegemonic model of masculinity, while refugee men are rarely mentioned in UN and host governments’ plans as in need for empowerment (UNHCR 2013; UNICEF 2015). Marginalized and subordinate masculinities are still perceived by humanitarians as either compliant with hegemonic masculinity to maintain the legitimacy of patriarchy (Olivius 2016b), or they are completely emasculated as in the case of disabled men.

When it comes to Syrian refugees with disabilities, disabled women are given the priority over disabled men following the international humanitarian gender standards (Rehman 2018). According to the 2015-2017 strategy report of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) Sub-Working Group (SWG) coordinated by UNHCR in Jordan, men with disabilities are seen as a homogenized group and are placed in vulnerable groups such as gay, lesbian, and transgender, whose gender identity or sexuality is not socially and culturally recognized. This institutional discourse of gender and

humanitarianism contributes to obfuscating “refugee men’s actual and varied lived experiences and challenges” (Turner 2019, 3), including the experiences of disabled men. It also contributes to how disabled men reformulate their masculinities without getting engaged in the humanitarian discourse of gender equality.

### **Empirical Analysis and Discussion**

The interviewed Syrian refugee men in Jordan and Turkey have been living with physical disabilities for a period ranging from 2 to 6 years. They fled to Jordan and Turkey for medical treatment and settled down in the two countries as refugees. Two interviewees lived in Gaziantep, Southeast Turkey, and three lived in the Jordanian governance of Amman and Mafraq. The interviewees came from different socio-economic, cultural and geographical backgrounds: Hytham was a business owner from the city of Aleppo; Ahmed was a lawyer from the city of Hems; Hasan was a university student from a low income family from Aleppo and Rami and Hamdan were poor labourers with only nine class schooling from Dara’a, a poor rural province in the south of Syria. They all shared the same situation of socio-economic vulnerability during the period of field research and avowed that they were reliant on humanitarian assistance. The interviewees were married and lived in nuclear families with their wives and children, except Hasan who was single aged 26 years old and lived with his parents and siblings.

Ahmed had a mutilated leg and the rest had spinal cord injuries. Men with spinal cord injuries were in wheelchairs, albeit with different levels of severity. Except Ahmed, the interviewees were reliant on their wives, or mother as in the case of Hasan, for care and support. In addition to reliance on humanitarian aid, Ahmed managed to find a job as a receptionist in Gaziantep. Alongside his university studies, Hasan was involved as a volunteer with a charity organization working for disabled Syrian refugees in Gaziantep. Rami and Hamdan lived in Mafraq. While Rami developed his own

homebased business, Hamdan had an insecure voluntary job with a charity organization. Hytham lived in Amman and did not contribute to providing for his family because his disability is more severe than his fellows.

The personal narratives of the five interviewed men show that they took several overlapping trajectories to cope with changes that had occurred in their lives due to displacement and disability. These trajectories compose of contradictory actions, thoughts and emotions and generate success and failure, ambiguity and coherence, acceptance and rejection, anger and calmness (Ghannam 2013, 170). In the discussion below, I rely on the interviewees' personal narratives to focus on the most obvious overlapping trajectories that the disabled Syrian men went through to construct a new version of masculinities that is not primarily regulated by physicality.

#### *Accepting and normalizing body changes*

The trajectory of accepting physical disability did not go smoothly and straightforwardly. The interviewees endured much physical and mental pain to accept the dramatic changes that had occurred in their bodies, or as they described it 'God's will'. Arguably, without accepting their disability, the interviewees would not be able to go through other trajectories of experiencing their lives with a disability. However, the trajectory of accepting and normalising a disabled body was not linear. Rather, it took different directions that resulted from the intersection between the interviewees' context of displacement and disability and their different historical and subjective experiences of masculinities, class background, religiosity and degrees of disability. In their narratives, they all evoked their historical experiences of masculinities and authentic individualities to normalize their body changes. They first compared disability with death.

Rami is a 43-year old married man with two children. He was severely tortured in prison by the Syrian regime, which resulted in his spinal cord injury. Rami's perception of his disabled body

helped him to quickly accept his body changes and start thinking of how to live with these in the context of displacement. He said: "My injury was caused by my involvement in the revolution, which I was proud of. I sacrificed my body for my nation, but I am still alive. Many others died. I still feel that I can do more for my nation." Hytham is a 40-year-old married man with three daughters. He had a spinal cord injury during the war while he was walking outside home to buy something for the family. He said: "Thank God, other men died from bombardment and they left their wives and children devastated. I still exist around my children." Rami and Hytham tried to re-physicalize their disabled bodies by comparing them with dead bodies. Their narrative implies that while the death of the body is an end to masculine trajectories, disabled bodies still function and can make social life "imaginable" (Wool 2011, 268).

Interviewees also referred to their historical experience of masculinities and selectively chose the rooted habituated non-physical traits of masculinities to normalize their disabled bodies. Hasan, the 23-year-old single Syrian man, described himself prior to the war, saying: "I am naturally a stubborn man, different from my brothers. I used to do things that I wanted to do and didn't surrender to people's gossip." "Stubbornness" was presented by Hasan as a defining element of ideal masculinities in Syria prior to the war. He said: "being stubborn allowed me to accomplish my education in Syria. The society in Syria respects educated men." Hasan focused on the subjective and relational elements of masculinities as the major assets that motivated him not to surrender to his disability. He said: "I spent a full year at home refusing to go out. I did not want to see people looking at me compassionately." When asked how he managed to get rid of the state of frustration, he noted:

Friends, brothers, mother and father, they all encouraged me to accept God's will and go out and socialize with people. I started to feel that I harm them by being frustrated. Though, as I told you

earlier, my stubborn personality pushed me to challenge people's gaze and perception that I am less than them. I am not less than anyone.

Hamdan is a 28-year old who was injured in an aerial bombardment in 2013 while he was trying to protect his son. His son was mildly injured but Hamdan had a severe injury to his spine. Since his injury, Hamdan has been in a wheelchair. Hamdan, like Hasan, referred to the masculine subjectivity he practiced prior to the war to accept his body changes. Although he mentioned that he used to be a sportsman, he marginalized the physical elements of his masculinity and gave more attention to the moral and relational elements. He said: "I used to be a very rigid and pure person in my village in Syria ... always stood on the side of rightness and against oppression." He added:

I remembered that I had never been a failure, or a passive person. People can still rely on me. My children can rely on me too. My injury is what God chose for me. I can't reject it but it does not change who I am.

Faith, as a subjective element, also played a significant role in accepting and normalizing disability. After Hytham realised that there was no hope for improvement in his health conditions, he evoked his pious masculine subjectivity to accept the will of God. He said:

I was pious before the war. I have become more connected to my faith by the injury. It is my faith that helped me to accept my disability... to be honest with you, sometimes I feel weak, but God offers me with patience and strength.

The interviewees with severe disabilities normalized their disabled bodies by referring to the non-physical elements of their historical masculine traits – stubbornness, faithfulness, reliability and fairness – and presented them as the defining elements of masculinities in Syria prior to the war. They self-consciously downgraded the socio-economic and physical elements of their masculinity in

their self-presentation and revived the moral and relational elements to maintain a sense of masculine selfhood in the context of their severe disability (Wentzel 2013; Hasso 2018).

Ahmed has the shortest and less harmful experience of disability – he lost his leg in 2016 – which made him take a different trajectory of body normalization. He chose to hide his mutilated leg by keeping the artificial limb on all the time in public. Despite the pain this caused, Ahmad endured the pain in order to avoid people’s gaze. With a similar meaning of comparing disability and death, Ahmed compared his mild disability with the severe disability of those who are in a wheelchair, in an attempt to re-signify, rather than de-signify, his physicality in comparison to others. He said: “I understand that it is impossible for those who are in wheelchairs to hide their disability in public, but I can. I get used to the pain the limb causes.”

Ahmed also normalised his disability by emphasizing his identity as a refugee over his identity as a disabled man. He said:

I don’t actually think of my disability. I am living with it. But how can I accept the other changes in my life? I was a lawyer in Syria and had a prestigious job and now I am a Syrian refugee seen as a person in need for help. No one would recruit me in a job relevant to my expertise as a lawyer not because I have a disability, but because I am a Syrian refugee.

Ahmed’s identity as a displaced Syrian refugee came first in his narrative attempting to equalize his masculine positionality with the majority of marginalised Syrian refugee men. He renegotiated the multi-layered hierarchy of his masculinities by signifying one masculine identity over the other in order to restore a satisfactory image of masculine selfhood. Ahmed’s dynamic of masculinization differs from the dynamic used by able-bodied, middle class Syrian refugee men in Cairo, who masculinized themselves by avoiding being labeled as refugees (Suerbaum 2018a). He took a contrasting masculine trajectory due to the type of his disability in connection with his class and



education background. He masculinized himself by differentiating his disability from severe disabilities and emphasising his refugee identity.

Disabled men normalize their bodies by negotiating the multi-layers of hierarchies between different masculine styles and within each group of men (Hirsch and Kachtan 2018). Within the wider context of Syrian refugees' displacement, disabled men hierarchized their masculinities by re-signifying the different elements of masculinities: severe disability is counted over death; mild disability is counted over severe disability; and refugeehood and displacement over disability. The narratives of disabled men also confirm that disability is just one element of masculinities that was negotiated with, but did not invalidate, the other varied elements of experienced masculinities. Rather, disability caused men to adapt with the new reality and take steps forward to "remaster their body and gender practices," responding to their changing socio-economic and physical conditions (Gagen 2007, 527).

#### *Revising the embodied practices of breadwinning, fatherhood and husbandhood*

The normalisation of the disabled body appeared as the critical trajectory that enabled the interviewees to go on revising the ideal images of masculinities demonstrated in their roles as breadwinners, fathers and husbands.

#### **Breadwinning**

The first thing the interviewed disabled men were concerned about after they finished medical treatment and accepted their disability was their role as the family breadwinner. While Rami was searching online, he found a video on YouTube about how to make statues from matchsticks. The idea stuck in his mind and he learned it very quickly. He also contacted humanitarian organizations that support Syrian refugees. He showed them his work and persuaded them to use it

in their donations' events to support Syrians. He managed to generate some money but it was not enough to support his family. He shifted to making small statues and selling them in the local market – “people can buy them as gifts with a cheap price.”

Hytham did things differently because his disability is more severe than Rami. He said:

Unfortunately, I could not do any work that requires staying in the wheelchair for more than two hours. Later, I bought 5 birds to raise at home and told my daughters that I raise them for sale in order to bring money to the family. That is of course not true, but just to let my daughters feel that I provide for the family.

Hamdan spent two years volunteering with a charity organisation with an irregular monthly payment that supplemented the insufficient funds his family received from UNHCR. Hamdan, as described by his friend Rami, had “a strong charisma and leadership talent,” which made him successful in his volunteering job and able to gain recognition in the community of disabled Syrian refugees. Despite the little money he received from this work, Hamdan felt good about it, saying: “at least I feel I contribute to the family income and also do something for other people.”

Having an artificial limb prevented Ahmed from doing a job that requires standing for long hours. He finally found a receptionist job. However, this job, as he said: “did not meet my aspiration, I have to do it because I have children to feed.” The bachelor status of Hasan affected the way he thought of his role as a breadwinner. He thought of the financial assistance he received from humanitarian organisations as a source of support to the whole family that provides him care, but it does not meet his desire for individual economic independence. He applied for several jobs but did not succeed in securing a job. Then he decided to apply for a scholarship provided to Syrian refugees to study in a college. He said: “having a college certificate may help me to find a good job.” He ended his interview saying: “Ok, I don't currently contribute to the family income, but at least I am not a burden.”

Although breadwinning for the interviewees was presented as a determinant of their masculine ideals, its actual practice did not generate any income, or enough income, to replace humanitarian assistance and secure the livelihood of their families. The self-presentation of breadwinning, as narrated by the interviewees, is more symbolic, to enhance their sense of caring and responsibility towards their families and resist the inferior position of being reliant on humanitarian assistance. However, the new ways of practicing breadwinning vary among disabled men due to their different degrees of disability, class and education backgrounds, marital status and personalities.

### Fatherhood

Fatherhood and breadwinning are principal roles in heteronormative marital relationships. To be an ideal father is to be a breadwinner and nurturer of children. Due to their inability to earn sufficient income to provide for their families, the interviewees enhanced their fatherhood by providing love and care to their children and maintaining the cultural image of fathers as the breadwinner.

Hytham's idea of raising birds at home did not actually aim to bring money to the family but was a symbolic action to recreate the sense of fatherhood towards his daughters. He said: "All what I am concerned about is that my disability does not have any negative effects on my daughters. I want them to always believe that a father is the one who is responsible for providing for the family." At the beginning of the interview with Rami, he emphasized that he has "a partial, not a full, spinal cord injury." By saying that, Rami tried to confirm that his disability did not affect his sexual and reproductive capacity and desire to be a father. In 2014, Rami got married and had two children. His sense of fatherhood uplifted his image of masculine ideals. He said: "When I look at my children, I forget my disability." During the interview with Hamdan, he was sitting in the wheelchair putting his young son on his lap and another son was on his shoulder and he said: "Those boys are who make

me feel alive. It is true that I don't bring them enough money as before but I am here around them, loving them. This is what children want from a father."

Ahmed's embodiment of fatherhood appeared to be more confined to the stereotypical performance of fatherhood due to his mild disability. He said: "I love my children but sometimes I can't control my temper. When I feel angry, I leave home in order not to harm my children. I know that my wife would take care of them."

With these narratives, disabled men revised the practice of fatherhood in different ways due to their different types of disability and breadwinning abilities. Fatherhood performance was revised from being centred on men's economic and financial capacity to provide for the family to being centred on love, care and self-sacrifice. Although the cultural stereotype of fatherhood associated with breadwinning remains intact and is encouraged to be reproduced by the new generation, its emergent performance based on care and love creates a potential for transforming the cultural stereotype over time and across generations (Inhorn and Wentzel 2011; Suerbaum 2018a and b).

## Husbandhood

The relational dimension of masculinity vis-à-vis femininity is revealed in this research as the most significant element in the process of constructing a new version of masculinities. Wives, in particular, played a crucial role in helping disabled husbands modify and reformulate their masculine identities, as well as challenge any feeling of emasculation. This confirms that masculinities, like femininities, attain their meaning in relation to each other, and are transformed by the changing socio-economic and physical conditions of both men and women (Connell 2005; Inhorn 2012). All disabled men spoke with empathy and a feeling of guilt about how their wives became overloaded with family responsibilities, including taking care of husbands and children, domestic work, accompanying husbands to hospitals and children to schools, shopping and paying bills.

For example, Rami mentioned that he was tough with his first wife in Syria. He regretted his behaviours. After he became disabled, he realised how important is his wife for him. He humbled himself at home and did not interfere in his wife's mobility, or decisions. When asked why things have changed this way, he said: "I have to accept the fact that I am not the same person as before and I see how kind, respectful and helpful my wife is. She does not let me feel down." Rami added: "I was nurtured in Syria to be a strong man and tough with the wife. That was wrong. I have learnt now that when I respect my wife and treat her nicely she does the same to me." Rami here enacted a new way of being a husband by countering the domination of husbands over their wives, which he realized was harmful through his experience of becoming a disabled man (Inhorn and Wentzell 2011).

Hytham's experience of conjugal relationship was different from Rami. He was influenced by his faith to treat his wife fairly. He noted:

I refer to my religion to treat my wife. My relation with my wife was very good in Syria. I used to take her out for a walk and sometimes joined her when she was shopping for the kids. I was fully responsible for the family and she was never in need to anything.

When asked how his relationship with his wife has changed after his injury, he said:

After I left the hospital, I brought my wife and her mother together. I asked my wife in front of her mother: if you would like to separate and go on with your life, this is your right! Of course, I did not wish this to happen, but it is her right. She replied to me: 'no, as I lived with you the glory days, I will also live with you the harsh days'. Since I became disabled, she has been solely responsible for everything. I grieve for her not for myself, but thank God, she is satisfied with the mercy of God.

Hytham referred to his authentic individuality as a pious man to perform husbandhood. He said:

What scares me is that sometimes I want to express my anger, my frustration at home but I immediately say to myself: ‘what is the matter with you man! Is it not enough that she (his wife) endures everything for me, and I still want to scream?’ Then I control myself and take a distance and listen to Quran. This calms me down.

Hamdan was reluctant to talk about his relationship with his wife, seemingly in an attempt to hide his reliance on her, as he, similar to Rami, came from a conservative village with a dominant patriarchal culture. He briefly mentioned: “my wife has not changed. She has been always a good wife and mother. She does not complain about her God’s will.” When asked what he does when he feels angry at home, Hamdan said: “I just leave home to avoid doing, or saying, anything that may anger my wife and children.”

Ahmed described his relationship with his wife as “fortunate, thank God.” He, like Hytham, actually grieves for his wife, not himself. He noted: “my wife, God bless her, is taking care of me and my autistic son. She relieved me of the stress caused by the debt.” Ahmed mentioned that his wife is a college graduate and she used to work before marriage. When asked if she tried to work after displacement, he said:

I am not completely disabled and it is my responsibility to provide for the family, even if this will cost me my life. It will not be fair for her (his wife) to take care of me and the sick boy, do the housework, cook and teach the children, and also work outside home.

Disabled men in this research felt very empathetic towards the unfair burden of responsibilities on their wives and tried to compensate them with love, respect, appreciation and fairness. Wives, on the other hand, as narrated by husbands, tried not to make their disabled husbands feel bad about themselves by showing them respect and consulting with them whenever they left home. However, the emergent practice of husbandhood among all interviewees is not engaged with the universal

term of gender equality introduced by humanitarian organisations. Rather, it remains emotionally and morally attached to the patriarchal virtues of conjugal connectivity, intimacy and self-sacrifice that have historically characterized Arab families (Joseph 1999).

The emergent practices of husbandhood overlapping with the emergent practice of breadwinning and fatherhood are not practiced as alternatives, or contrasts, to the dominant traditional gender practice of heteronormative masculinities, but as a revised version of the refugees' stereotypical practices (Inhorn 2012; Wentzel 2013). Breadwinning, fatherhood and husbandhood are performative by which their patriarchal ideals, norms and values are discursively negotiated and renegotiated responding to the changing context and body (Ghannam 2013, 71; Suerbaum 2018 a and b).

#### *Moralizing and humanizing ideal manhood*

The interviewees not only revised their masculine embodiments at home in relation to their roles as breadwinners, fathers and husbands. They also revised their masculine practices in public. They challenged the authoritarian and oppressive masculine practices in public institutions by moralizing and humanizing their masculinities as a collective and relational project (Ghannam 2013; Ingvars and Ingolfur 2018). They all talked about their experiences with charity and international humanitarian aid organizations as "disappointing and unjust." Rami, for example, felt very disappointed and angry with charity organizations, which he considered to have deceived him. He described the practice of these organizations as "patronizing." He said: "do they think that we live with no dignity because we are disabled? They don't know that we were nurtured to be men from an early age." Although Rami's quote consciously or unconsciously refers to the stereotypical hegemonic masculine ideals of acting as assertive and fearless and being in control within the dominant culture of patriarchy that he experienced in Syria prior to his injury, the context in which this quote was said implies resistance to

domination and hierarchy practiced by institutions in power. The hegemonic masculine traits of assertiveness and fearlessness are presented as crucial in signifying “real men” (Abu-Lughod 1986, 88; Peteet 1994), who reject being excluded and patronized by institutions of power in the context of displacement and disability.

Hamdan had a more intense experience with charity organizations. From his perspective, the latter only used disabled people to generate funds and did not respond to their actual needs. Hamdan criticized the sport and entertainment activities that charities provided for disabled people. According to him, such activities made disabled men feel unreliable and irresponsible, like children. He suggested that charities should encourage men to enhance their sense of manhood by providing them with work opportunities to support their families. He said:

We accept our disability and know how to handle it. Humanitarian organizations keep making us feel vulnerable. They treated us as children. Yes, we are in need for help, like all other Syrian refugees, but we refuse to be humiliated.

Hamdan invested in his personal characteristics that were described by his friend Rami as “the most charismatic and rebellious man among us.” He rarely mentioned his disability during the interview. Instead, he focused on presenting his authentic individuality and nurturing masculine morality and humanity. Hamdan reinvested in his discursive masculine subjectivity, rooted within the dominant patriarchal structure and culture, to construct a new vision of embodied masculine ideals. He described himself prior to the war as “always available to help others.” “This is how a good man should act,” he said. Hamdan’s just personality is what made him respected by other people in Syria before the war and by disabled Syrian refugees after displacement. As described by his friend Rami, “Hamdan acts as our leader. He brought us together to discuss and solve our problems.”

In his narrative, Hamdan intentionally, or unintentionally, replaced the word “disability” with collective expressions such as “our conditions” and “our injuries” in an attempt to present masculinity



as “a collective project that is negotiated through interactions” between disabled men and others at home and in the community (Ghannam 2013, 3). He said, as he speaks on behalf of all his disabled fellows: “our conditions actually made us more connected to how we were nurtured as men in Syria prior to the war. Syrian men were, and are still, stubborn and rejecting any form of humiliation and oppression.” Reflecting on his experience with humanitarian organization, he said:

Humanitarian organizations taught us that we have the same rights as others. They need to turn their words into actions. We, injured men, are not a tool to be used for their advantage. We still have the power and the spirit and will not allow anyone to suppress us.

Hamdan, like his friend Rami, repeatedly used the word “nurtured” to refer to the stereotypical masculine ideals of assertiveness, fearlessness and fairness. The repetitive use of this word is twofold: while they desire to keep the idealized cultural image of hegemonic masculinity that is no longer associated with power and control, they redefine the meaning and practice of power for domination into power for justice. Hamdan’s masculine ideals, similar to the other interviewees, were not invalidated by disability. Rather, they were negotiated and revised to create a version of “respectable masculinities” that are based on the moral, relational and collective elements of the traditionally habituated masculinities that they experienced during their life span (Kleist 2010).

Hytham and Hasan were also critical of how humanitarian organizations put disabled men in a separate and homogenized category and do not invite them to participate in activities with able-bodied men. Hytham said: “the support we got from humanitarian organizations is not different from what is provided to unemployed men. We are all vulnerable and have to be treated equally.” Hasan’s bachelorhood, young age, and original ethnicity as a Turk in addition to his less severe disability than Hytham allowed him to be more agentive in revising his masculine embodiments. He challenged the singular categorization of disabled men by institutions in power, saying:

I don't want to be seen as different from others. I searched for the activities provided for men without disabilities and put myself in. I did not register myself as disabled, why should I? I actually do the same things other men do.'

Hasan, like Hamdan, elevated his sense of manhood by emphasizing the relational and collective meaning of manhood. He mentioned that he is at an advantage in that he speaks fluent Turkish, and thus he can help other Syrian refugees. He said: "many Syrian refugees came and asked me to translate some documents from Arabic to Turkish. Doing things for other people makes me feel good about myself." Hasan also emphasized his potential to do more. He said: "I am now back to the old Hasan. Hasan with the same mind and soul but sitting in a wheelchair." With this quote, Hasan de-physicalized his masculinity by giving more emphasis to the cognitive, spiritual, relational and human elements of manhood, which allowed him to regain social recognition and valuation within the Syrian refugee community and charity organizations. Hasan's emergent masculine practices in the Syrian community, similar to Hamdan's, are indicative of inclusive masculinities, in which he invested in his ethnic identity as a Turk to get engaged in community activities supporting other marginalized and subordinated Syrian men (Anderson 2008, 616).

Ahmed took a different trajectory of moralizing his masculine practice due to his minor disability and his class and education background. He was also critical of humanitarian organizations' work. He got involved in their activities whenever he was free, but did not rely on them for material support. While talking about his deteriorating economic conditions and accumulated debt, he said: "If I acted like a beggar for humanitarian assistance from organizations, I would not accumulate that much debt. I prefer borrowing from relatives than begging for help from humanitarian organizations." He added: "my relatives know who I am and who I was and what I accomplished in my life before the war. They know that I am not a lazy Syrian man who relies on humanitarian assistance." Unlike other interviewees who tried to de-physicalize their masculinities, accepted their

reality and acknowledged their vulnerability, the mild disability of Ahmed made him more connected to the hegemonic masculine ideals of physicality and accomplishment – rejecting being seen as a lazy Syrian man reliant on humanitarian aid. He masculinized himself by frequent referral to his previous accomplishment in order to reduce the feeling of instability and uncertainty that characterized his present conditions (Suerbaum 2018b, 683).

Although Ahmed tried to define himself symbolically within the traditional pattern of hegemonic masculinity based on the elements of physicality and material accomplishment (Connell 2005), his actual relational masculine embodiment and the meanings and values he demonstrated were not hegemonic. Rather they served to challenge the hegemonic masculinity practiced by institutions in power (Hirsch and Kachtan 2018, 698). He emphasized the moral elements of masculine ideals such as self-reliance, self-other respect, dignity and social recognition and delegitimizes domination and humiliation.

To sum up, the interviewees differed in the ways they revised the social, moral and emotional embodiments of their masculinities at home and in local community. They did so by inventing in their intersectional identities such as class, ethnicity, age and marital status; their historical experiences of masculinities in the place of origin and the diversity in their personal characteristics. These intersectional factors contributed to shaping multiple and contradictory trajectories of thinking, acting and feeling masculinities in relation to disability (Shuttleworth 2012). The interviewed disabled men heterogeneously renegotiated the masculine embodiments in a way that allowed them “to embrace new visions of selfhood that nevertheless often adhered to masculine ideals” (Gagen 2007, 538).

### **Concluding Remarks**

The interviewed disabled Syrian refugee men are still, and will remain, in a dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing multiple and contradictory masculine trajectories that overlap each

other in response to the unexpected changes that occur in their context and bodies (Ghannam 2013; Inhorn 2012; Wentzel 2013). This process, as revealed in the interviewees' narratives, is historical, contextual, subjective and intersubjective. Disabled men went into a contradictory and complex process of making and remaking a new sense of masculine selfhood that mediated between the past and the present and was affected by the extended experience of living with disability in the particular context of displacement and humanitarianism.

The different masculine trajectories used by disabled men allow us to understand how men negotiate the changing bodies, social and economic expectations, as well as discourses of power and gender relations at home and in the local community in the making of their masculine subjectivities. The experiences of disabled men demonstrate that their acceptance of bodily changes, as a result of their present reality, is an element that intersects with others, including their socio-economic vulnerability in the context of displacement and their historical and subjective experiences of masculinities to make different trajectories of negotiating masculinities. Their masculine trajectories overlapped and took steps forwards and backwards, including conforming to some elements of classical hegemonic masculine ideals and subverting others. And more importantly, they brought together their pre-displacement experience of masculinities, their authentic individuality in the name of masculinity, their present reality, and revised their varied elements to redefine what a good man means in their new context of displacement and disability.

The new version of masculinities developed by disabled men is not a new category of masculinity (De Boise and Hearn 2017). Rather, as Emily Wentzell (2013) argues, it is a revised version of masculinities that combines varied elements of individuals' lived experiences. Disabled men in this research went through a process of re-signification and de-signification of the intersectional elements that have historically constituted their multiple and plural masculinities. The past experiences of masculinities interweaved with the present reality to develop new ways of making a

masculine selfhood. The emergent version of masculinities reveal in this research is not in opposition to the dominant culture, but is “incorporated into” it, “causing the social order itself to change over time” (Inhorn and Wentzel 2011, 803).

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### **Contributor’s Note**

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