

Dina Zbeidy



# Marriage and Displacement among Palestinian and Syrian Refugees in Jordan



UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM

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View of Amman. Photo taken by author.





## Chapter One

# Introduction: Marriage and Displacement in Jordan

# Introduction: Marriage and Displacement in Jordan

This thesis is about the interplay between displacement and marriage practices. My interest in the topic arose after reading several news articles and publications from various organizations about ‘early marriages’ among poor Syrian families in refugee camps in the Middle East. According to these publications, these families believed that they had no choice but to have their young daughters marry. The motivations for these marriages were usually explained as easing the financial pressure on families and providing a sense of security. One article after another repeated the same narrative. Syrian refugees were in dire conditions, and one of the main mechanisms they had developed to cope with the difficulties they faced was early marriage—sometimes forcing their daughters to marry much older men from other countries against the girls’ will. As horrific as these accounts were, I thought that there must be more to the story. I wanted to know the different ways displacement might impact marriage practices of refugee communities and better understand the lives of these young girls and their families. Instead of taking as point of departure a phenomenon such as ‘early marriage’ and investigating the factors and motivations behind it, I believed it imperative to start out from the practices of social actors on the ground to see how and why they married the way they did, and the role of displacement in their marriage practices.

The research took place in Jordan, a country with a complex and extensive history with refugees. In order to understand the different dimensions of displacement I included two cases of refugee-ness—the Palestinian and the Syrian, each occupying different positions in relation to their home country, the Jordanian government, and their current situation. Estimates put the percentage of Palestinians in Jordan at around half of the total population of the country. The majority are second, third and fourth generation refugees descended from Palestinian families that were displaced either in the aftermath of the 1948 War and the creation of the State of Israel, or the 1967 Six-Day War. Since 2012 Jordan has additionally been receiving Syrian refugees, who currently form an estimated ten per cent of the local population. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR)

provides them with the necessary documents that allow them to legally stay in Jordan, and together with the Jordanian government and other humanitarian and development organizations they provide aid and services to Syrians. Most Palestinians and Syrians do not live in the official refugee camps set up for them. While Syrian camps are intensively regulated and controlled, residents of Palestinian camps are more mobile and have often been actively involved in shaping the landscape of the camps in which they live. Since 2012, many Syrians have moved to Palestinian camps, one of which is the field site of this research.

The role of international and local organizations is central to the refugee issue in Jordan. They take responsibility for refugees' humanitarian needs, and work closely with governments and other local, national and transnational actors to coordinate humanitarian aid, health, and education. Organizations vary from faith-based charity groups, to local and international rights, humanitarian and development organizations.<sup>1</sup> They provide refugees with much-needed services and are often concerned with promoting human rights issues. Many organizations design intervention programmes aimed at raising awareness about and attempting to change particular marriage forms and practices. A large part of this thesis therefore focuses on the work these organizations do around topics of displacement and marriage, and their role in local marriage practices.

The aim of the research is to understand how displacement impacts marriage practices. I simultaneously use the investigation of marriage practices to garner a profound and multi-faceted understanding of how refugees navigate and make sense of refugee life. The main research questions are: How do refugees and development organizations problematize particular forms of marriages in situations of displacement and refugee-ness? How does this problematization interact with actual marriage practices and intervention programmes of development organizations on the ground?

The questions in exploring processes of problematizations revolve around how and why certain phenomena or practices come to be seen as a problem (Bacchi 2012), and how different factors and relations allow 'something to become a 'problem' in one situation and not in another' (Ibid:6). The chapters of this thesis concern this central question by bringing in both Palestinian and Syrian experiences. I look at which aspects of displacement impact specific marriage practices, and how and why specific practices are seen by the various actors as a problem, while other aspects are considered desirable and are aspired to. The analysis in

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1 In this dissertation, these different types of organizations are subsumed under the term 'development organizations.' See section 'Development organizations, discourse and social embeddedness' below for more.

these chapters brings to light the way marriages are vital to processes of emplacement, home-making and the (re)building of social networks. It moreover shows how refugees navigate the physical and normative landscape and use the spaces available to them in their social practices, including in marriage.

In what follows I explain my theoretical approach to studying marriages in displacement and situate my research in the wider literature on refugees. The remaining sections provide context and background information on Palestinians and Syrians in Jordan, on the research location—the Palestinian refugee camp of Wihdat in Amman—and on my fieldwork and methods.

## Situating the research and contribution

### GETTING MARRIED WHILE NAVIGATING DISPLACEMENT

Marriage and kinship have always been central themes in anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Through kinship ties people 'establish social relations and mark distinctions among themselves' (Eickelman 1998: 140). One way to produce kinship relations is through marriages. Until the early 1970s, kinship studies were grounded in structural-functional theories (Peletz 1995: 345). The focus lay on examining kinship structures and the structural significance of marriage ties (ibid: 350). As a result, marriage was presented as a universal, stable and timeless structure in anthropology (Borneman 1996: 220). This mode of theorising marriages changed with the emergence of feminist, Marxist, and social history scholarship (Peletz 1995). Beforehand, women were mainly seen as objects—objects of desire for men and objects of exchange in marriages—who's function in marriages could only be understood in relation to men (Borneman 1996: 222). With feminist and Marxist scholarship, attention shifted to the ways marriages and kinship produce difference and inequality (Peletz 1995: 358), and women's experiences and roles were studied in their own

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2 With few exceptions, new kinship scholars, with Sahlins (2013) prominent among them, pay very little attention to marriages. Moreover, As Shyrock puts it, Sahlins focuses on regions that he considers as largely diverging from Euro-American cultures, leaving him uninterested in ethnographic research in the Middle East (2013: 271–272). With Sahlins's use of the term 'mutuality of being,' he also strongly idealizes kinship relations. For a more balanced approach see Joseph (1994), who shows that brother-sister relations are both strongly affective, power laden and hierarchical.

right.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the work of social history scholars drew attention to historical changes, and to the everyday lived experiences and practices of people (Ibid: 353).

A similar shift took place in legal anthropology and the study of family relations and Islamic family law in Muslim-majority settings. Whereas until the 1970s most scholars followed textual approaches and theorised family relations as the outcome of family law provisions, since then more scholars started to investigate Muslim marriages as practices and experiences (Moors 1999: 142, 166). Reflecting changes in the discipline of anthropology, scholars studying Muslim marriages started to pay attention to the construction of gender and gender relations through social practices and discourses, instead of taking for granted the patriarchal nature of societies and the subordination of women (Ibid: 142). Scholars also recognised women as knowledgeable actors and paid attention to the differences among them instead of treating them as a homogeneous group (Ibid).

This approach to studying Muslim marriages uncovered the tensions that arise between law and social practice, and how people acted towards and experienced them. In Iran and Morocco, for example, Mir-Husseini showed these tensions by examining both the theory and practice of Islamic law, investigating law provisions, actual marriage and divorce cases, and the ways actors take advantage of the ambiguities and tensions that resulted from the codification of Sharia in modern legal systems (1993). She also uncovered women's agency in turning to Islamic law and making it work to their benefit in divorce, paternity and custody disputes.

This move towards an analysis of marriage that pays attention to social actors, historic contexts, and daily practices and experiences echoes the more general shift in anthropology in the 1960s towards practice theory as an analysis approach. Practice theory brought together structural conditions and practices of social actors in a dialectical rather than oppositional relation, investigating how structures and systems produce and are (re)produced by social actors (Ortner 2006: 2-3). Similar to this body of work, this thesis looks at marriage practices on the ground and how they interact with larger structures and social forces. I pay attention to social actors and focus on what they do and say when it comes to marriage. At the same time, I analyse how marriage influences, and is influenced by, structural conditions—such as the political and historical context, and people's social and economic status—and by displacement.

Furthermore, this research shows that social formations and structural conditions are not static but change over time. I highlight the relationship between

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3 While Borneman recognizes a shift in marriage studies with the emergence of feminist scholarship, he also criticizes it for leaving the centrality of marriage unquestioned (1996: 228).

actors and social forces as one of 'intersection—or rather interactivity—between the two' (Vigh 2009: 420). I therefore look at how refugees 'navigate' their conditions, showing that 'people act in and shape their social environments in constant dialogue with the way the social environment moves and the way it is predicted to 'act' upon them and shape the circumstances of their lives' (Ibid: 433).

Thus, not only do I show that marriage is not a fixed and static structure, but I also show that displacement is not a stable structural force that impacts refugees in a consistent and unchanging way. For instance, one area on which displacement imposes various conditions is legal residency and citizenship rights in the host country. Refugees navigate these imposed legal conditions in an attempt to nevertheless find an income, secure accommodation, and get married. While in the first years of displacement ensuring longer-term residency in the host country might not be a priority, in protracted displacement residency rights and citizenship increase in importance as they ensure access to rights and services. As the Palestinian case will show, over time this element starts to play a more important role in marriage practices, and therefore families and individuals begin to prefer marriage to someone with the desirable legal papers. As such, the conditions of displacement change over time and with geopolitical developments, and refugees adapt and change their practices and strategies accordingly. Their practices simultaneously impact their experience of displacement and refugee-ness. By searching for desirable marriage partners, building social networks, and working towards futures that are uncertain, they actively shape their environment.

Recent anthropological research on marriage has illustrated this interactivity between actors and social formations, investigating both how structural forces impact the lived experience of people and their marriage practices, and how people navigate and interact with these conditions. Osella (2012), for example, shows how migration patterns, Islamic reform, and market developments are changing matrilineal households in Kerala. She simultaneously pays attention to how women devise strategies to cope with the challenges that are impacting their daily lives due to these changes, such as their move to smaller households away from family and losing the company and support of female kin. Similarly, Connolly investigates the concerns residents have in East Kalimantan regarding inter-religious Muslim-Christian marriages (2009). While she acknowledges that these concerns are impacted by the marginalized position of Christian Dayaks, she argues for the necessity to investigate the 'experiential level of the family and the individual' (Ibid: 492).

Closer to the region of this research, scholarship on Egypt, the UAE, and Palestine has also shown the dialectic relationship between structure and agency in marriages. Hasso, for instance, looks at the effect of legal reforms and state reg-



ulations on marriage practices in Egypt and the UAE, where people devise new strategies and different forms of relationships that in their turn infuse political debates (2010). As she states, these practices are the result of 'dynamic interactions between indigenous experiences, beliefs, and desires, modern state requirements, and the less bounded flows of people and ideas made possible in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries' (2010: 15). Locating the changes in a specific historic moment, she shows people's interaction with their wider context, and the impact this has on marriage practices and discourses. A similar argument is made by Johnson et. al. (2009) who, based on their research in Palestine, show how the larger political context impacts the ways people arrange and celebrate marriages.

In addition to migration patterns, minority-majority relations, law and state regulation, another force that impacts marriage is the economy. Hoodfar argues that the market plays an important role in household relations and marriage practices in Egypt (1997). Similar to the aforementioned literature, by focusing on practices of social actors within their wider contexts, she shows how women and families devise marriage strategies that challenge customary and legal obstacles they face (1997: 19).

The literature discussed above and my research have two things in common. First, they treat marriages as contextualized social practices. Marriages are not fixed and stable structures, nor are they (merely) the outcome of legal texts and Islamic law. Second, this literature is actor-oriented. While it pays attention to larger structures that impact marriages, such as the legal and political system and the market, it aims to shed light on how actors navigate, act, and deal with these ever-changing structures. As Fortier et. al. (2016) have argued for scholarship on Egypt, Syria and Jordan, 'exploring public debates, specific sociocultural contexts, and intimate dilemma's' reveals the variety of experiences and practices people engage in, instead of taking marriage as a 'set of rigid institutions predetermined by unchanging culture' (Ibid: 99). The literature mentioned above is far from exhaustive. It is a selection of relevant scholarship that has contributed to my approach to studying marriages. More literature on marriage will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Another central theme in my approach to researching marriage is the dialectic relationship between hope and despair. While refugees face ample obstacles, they are also actively engaged with working towards their futures and building good lives, often through marriage. Brown et. al. (2015) suggest considering hope as 'a lived experience of going forward amidst vulnerability' (Ibid: 210). They build on the work of Zigon (2009) who argues that more than imagining an ideal, hope involves 'the temporal orientation of intentional and ethical action' that can help in overcoming hardships and crises (Zigon 2009: 267). In this reading, hope is

intimately connected to vulnerability and is a way for people in difficult positions to imagine and work towards better futures. Kleist and Jansen reiterate this point by arguing for the importance of exploring 'hope as engagement with the future in contexts characterized by crisis, conflict and its effects, uncertainty and immobility' (2016: 373).

Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Jordan are vulnerable in the face of legal, economic and social hardships. Nevertheless, they do not simply cope with these difficulties that are imposed on them by displacement. They also have hopes for their future and actively shape their lives in an attempt to improve their, and their loved ones', well-being. They do this, in part, through marriage. My aim is not to draw attention away from the oppressive structures and violence refugees face on a daily basis. Rather, I integrate what Ortner terms dark anthropology that investigates power and inequality, with anthropology of the good (Ortner 2016). Ortner explains that anthropology of the good includes studies on morality, ethics, well-being, and the good life, and extends this definition to also include anthropologies of resistance, critique, and activism (Ibid: 47). One example of such scholarly work that integrates both dark and 'light' anthropology is Peteet's book on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon titled *Landscape of Hope and Despair* (2005). Peteet focuses on 'the tension and interplay between, on the one hand, the structural constraints imposed on refugees by displacement, refugee camps, international agencies, and host countries, and, on the other, refugees' individual and collective agency in crafting daily lives that transformed these structures and spaces' (2005: 2). Peteet demonstrates how Palestinian refugees craft meaningful identities and create a sense of place under challenging conditions, and simultaneously incorporates the interactivity between structural constraints and the agency of refugees.

While Peteet focuses on hope, I bring forward a discussion on aspirations among refugees. Hope and aspirations are intimately connected. The Oxford dictionary defines aspiration as 'direct[ing] one's hope or ambitions towards achieving something' (quoted in Baillergeau et. al. 2015: 13). Falling under the anthropology of the good, as presented by Ortner, aspirations are about directing one's hope towards a specific goal. In this thesis, aspirations mainly emerge as the active imagination of—and premeditated acting towards—a better future. I demonstrate that marriages are desired, aspired to, and celebrated, in situations of refugee-ness because of their role in rebuilding social networks and creating a sense of home. Investigating how marriage is aspired to among displaced communities reveals important aspects of how refugees experience displacement, such as their relation to their home and host country, and the impact it has on their emotional and social conditions. Such an investigation also reveals how refugees envision,



hope for, and imagine their future amidst uncertain circumstances, allowing for some light to shine through the darkness.

## REFUGEE CAMPS AS LIVED SPACES

I conducted fieldwork for this research in Wihdat Camp in Amman. Set up by the United Nations for Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) in the 1950s to accommodate Palestinian refugees, it is nowadays more of an integrated lower-income residential neighbourhood of East Amman that houses, among others, Palestinians and Syrians. Scholars have been studying Palestinian camps intensively throughout the years. Palestinians' protracted displacement, regional conflicts, and the political contexts in the receiving countries are all themes that provided important angles for investigation.

Refugee camps in Jordan and beyond come in many variations and differ in aspects such as composition, living conditions and history. Despite these variations, Feldman (2015b) identifies three main ways to approach refugee camps: as humanitarian spaces, as political spaces and as emotional spaces. First, she shows that gathering refugees in one space enables the provision of aid and the concentration of humanitarian relief and management (Ibid: 246). Scholars have gone further than investigating Palestinian refugee camps as mere humanitarian spaces, arguing that these humanitarian actors, together with governments and political actors, are also complicit in governmental practices and exercising control over residents (Hanafi and Long 2010, Hanafi 2008, Ramadan 2009a).<sup>4</sup> Second, the Palestinian case has demonstrated that camps are also political spaces: camps have been used as symbols for the national cause and in official Palestinian nationalist discourses (Feldman 2015b: 247). Indeed, much literature focuses on the importance of the camps in Palestinian nationalism and identity formation (Sayigh 1977, J. Hart 2002, Achilli 2014, Farah 2009a, Ramadan 2009b). Third, following her research in Wihdat Camp, Feldman concludes that camps are emotional spaces to which residents develop deep attachments (Feldman 2015b: 249). Additional research has similarly shown that Palestinian camps are indeed spaces

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4 The focus in much of this literature is on refugee camps in Lebanon. These scholars have also drawn on Agamben (2005) to theorize camps as spaces of exception where law is suspended. While the governmental aspect is also obvious in Palestinian camps in Jordan, the status of Palestinians in Jordan and their relation to the Jordanian government is very different from Lebanon's specific political and historic context. They are far from places of exception where state sovereignty is suspended.

towards which residents develop affection and senses of belonging (Gabiam 2016, Allan 2014).

In this research I draw on the above-mentioned scholarly work to highlight camps as *lived spaces* that include aspects of humanitarianism, politics and emotion. I show how the camp encompasses all these elements, with a focus on how they feature in day to day camp life. The chapters investigate how the camp's infrastructure impacts social practices, while simultaneously presenting the political and affective meanings residents attach to the camp. Issues of governmentality and nationalism feature in this research to the extent that they played a role in the daily lives and practices of my interlocutors.

By looking at refugee camps as lived spaces, it is essential to understand the mechanisms involved in producing space. Lefebvre talks of a perceived-conceived-lived triad in the production of space (Lefebvre 2014: 292). He argues that spaces are *conceived* through logic and technical knowledge that involve urban planners, engineers and maps. This mirrors the focus of scholars on governmental and humanitarian practices in the camps. Moreover, people *perceive* space through spatial practices in which they use and generate space in their daily routines (Ibid). Places are also *lived*, they are constructed through local knowledge and imbued with symbolism and meaning in what Lefebvre terms representational spaces: 'space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols' (Ibid: 291). These latter two components, spatial practices (*perceived*) and representational space (*lived*), feature centrally in this thesis. They are embodied in daily place-making practices—in the ways people are involved in using, interpreting and imagining places.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to realize that 'everything we study is emplaced; it happens somewhere and involves material stuff' (Gieryn 2000: 466). It is for the researcher to actively include these places in the research analysis instead of considering them merely as background. These places are not only produced, however, but also become agentic in their own right; 'a force with detectable and independent effects on social life' (Ibid). It is therefore that I examine on the one hand the ways Wihdat residents use the spaces available to them, incorporate them in their daily practices, and attach meanings to them—while on the other hand, I make clear that these places also impact residents' practices. Places are normative landscapes imbricated in moral judgements that dictate proper behaviour and de-

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5 While some scholars such as Gieryn (2000) make an analytical distinction between the concepts of space and place, ('place is space filled up by people, practices, objects, and representations' (Gieryn 2000: 465)), Ingold (2009) has argued against the use of an abstract concept of space and the containment of place in space. I use the two terms rather interchangeably and do not make an analytical distinction between the two.

viance (Gieryn 2000: 479). As such, the normative landscape of Wihdat impacts marriage practices of Palestinians and Syrians. The camp's landscape also includes the various local centres where development organizations implement their projects. As I will show, these centres also actively shape the social life of Wihdat residents, including marriage practices.

The level of importance of the three aspects Lefebvre discusses differ for Palestinians and Syrians. The representational aspect of Wihdat plays an important role for Palestinians. Being a camp resident is an important feature in their marriage practices because of the camp's socioeconomic status in Amman and Palestinians' long history there, during which time the camp has gained political and symbolic meaning. Since the Syrians have a shorter history in Jordan with no political or symbolic meaning attached to the camp, for them the significance of Wihdat is more grounded in the concrete experience of day to day life, and in the landscape they navigate. The camp emerges as a safe but temporary shelter: a place to live while awaiting a return.

## (DE)CONSTRUCTING THE REFUGEE: DISPLACEMENT, IDENTITIES, AND REFUGEE-REFUGEE RELATIONS

First of all, we don't like to be called 'refugees.' Now 'refugees' are those of us who have been so unfortunate as to arrive in a new country without means and have to be helped by Refugee Committees.

*Hannah Arendt in 'We Refugees' (2009: 110)*

My wife and I refuse to be framed as refugees. The image of the refugee does not represent us and is not in our best interest... We registered with UNHCR recently, three years after our arrival to Jordan, but we only did this to get a certain type of legal status and legal protection.

*Wael Qaddour, Syrian playwright and director.  
Quoted in Lenner and Al-Khatib (2015: 44)*

This thesis concerns itself with Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan. The legal term 'refugee' does not have a very long history. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, was set up in 1951 in the aftermath of the Second World War in order to manage the thousands of people displaced in Europe. The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees was updated with a 1967 Protocol to cover refugees globally, and defined a refugee as follows:

... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (article 1A.2).

Through the use of legalistic terminology, international conventions promoted a politics of categorization that has been used by governments and organizations alike to define people as refugees, forced migrants, economic migrants, asylum seekers, internally displaced, stateless, etc. This categorization enables their governance and management, and bestows rights on them based on the extent to which they fulfil these legal bureaucratic definitions (Zetter 2007). The quotes of Hannah Arendt and Wael Qaddour above, speaking fifty years and continents apart, show that the term 'refugee' is often imposed, and only necessary in order to receive certain rights and protections.

While these legal categorizations and labels are governmental tools, they are also challenged, appropriated and contested (Cabot 2012: 12). For example, aid recipients in refugee camps actively appropriate humanitarian organizations' discourses on rights in order to negotiate services (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010), and use them as basis for demanding protection and rights from the various organizations (Farah 2009b: 405). For many Palestinians, for example, claiming refugee status is a way to maintain a connection with their homeland, to make visible historic injustices exercised against them, and call actors to action. For many of my interlocutors, being a refugee primarily meant dealing with injustices and hardships resulting from their displacement and ambiguous legal status. They often invoked the responsibility of the international community and the Jordanian government and demanded their help and support.

In this thesis I thus do not refer to refugees only in a legal sense, as I include Syrians and Palestinians who might not necessarily possess legal proof of their refugee status (at least I never asked for such proof or confirmed their legal status). Refugee-ness in this thesis refers to the experience of having been displaced and exiled due to war and conflict or being the descendent of a parent who was dis-

placed. More than a legal term, refugee here encompasses a 'sense of violence and political and economic upheaval and insecurity' (Peteet 2007: 630).<sup>6</sup>

It is important when writing on refugees, as Malkki has argued, to keep in mind that "refugees" do not constitute a naturally self-delimiting domain of anthropological knowledge' (1995: 496). Rather, she argues, 'the term refugee has analytical usefulness not as a label for a special, generalizable 'kind' or 'type' of person or situation, but only as a broad legal or descriptive rubric that includes within it a world of different socioeconomic statuses, personal histories, and psychological or spiritual situations' (1996: 496). Following Malkki, I look at the particularities of Syrian and Palestinian displacements and people's differing socioeconomic and legal statuses. This thesis aims to investigate *how* being a refugee impacts marriage practices and discourses, and how refugee-ness intersects with other experiences, identities, statuses and histories.

In researching Palestinian displacement, many scholars have foregrounded the national identity of Palestinian refugees in their studies. A significant contribution of literature on Palestinians has been to show the tensions that arise between the nationalism promoted in official Palestinian discourse and that of refugees. For example, while the Palestinian leadership accentuates a 'united harmonious—even homogeneous— peoplehood', refugees themselves challenge this by focusing on their villages of origin and more local elements of collective memory (Khalili 2004: 7). Scholars have also recognized the different identifications that have developed in exile instead of taking for granted refugees' Palestinian national identity (Allan 2014: 5). This thesis builds on these insights to show the tensions and co-existence of different senses of belonging—especially those made visible by marriage practices and discourses. Instead of looking at identities as fixed and unchanging, identifications are dynamic and part of ongoing and open-ended processes (Bauman 2001).

These processes of identification become clear in marriage practices since people either transgress or maintain constructed and perceived social boundaries through marriage.

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6 Abu-Lughod has argued that since Palestinians are unable to return to Palestine, as they have been prevented from doing so, they are better referred to as exiles instead of refugees (1988). Malkki also makes a distinction between the two terms but locates the difference elsewhere. She argues that while 'exile' connotes a readily aestheticizable realm, the label 'refugees' connotes a bureaucratic and international humanitarian realm (1995: 153). I describe both Syrians and Palestinians as refugees and I use the word exile throughout the thesis mainly to connote the inability of refugees to return to what they deem as their homeland. In this sense, being a refugee and living in exile are not mutually exclusive.

In contrast to the extensive literature available on Palestinian refugees, less has been published on the Syrians as their predicament is fairly recent. There are numerous assessments and studies conducted by humanitarian and rights organizations that shed light on the Syrian refugee situation in and outside of the official Syrian camps. Academically, research published on the topic to this date focuses on the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis (Davis and Taylor 2013, Turner 2016), and their acceptance and treatment in the various host countries (Turner 2015a, 2015b, Sullivan and Tobin 2015). This thesis brings a longer-term ethnographic analysis of Syrian refugee-ness that provides insights into how refugees deal with the challenges presented to them during the first years of displacement. The way Syrians adapt to new physical and normative landscapes, their precarious legal status in the direct aftermath of war, and their engagements with hopes for a future return to Syria while simultaneously building a life in displacement, are all aspects that come to light.

This research adds another dimension to refugee studies that has been developing recently, namely focusing on refugee-refugee relations and overlapping displacement (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). Just as in the case of other Palestinian camps in Lebanon and Jordan, Wihdat became a shared space of refuge. As Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues, there are not many studies conducted on different groups of refugees that live in the same city (2016: 1). Investigating the ‘ongoing cycles of displacement and the multidirectionality of movement’ problematizes the ‘assumption that refugees are ‘hosted’ by settled national populations’ (2016: 3). Instead, the chapters in this thesis show how Syrians not only had to adapt to the legal, political and social conditions of Jordan at large, but also to that of the Palestinians in Wihdat who have been dealing with the impact of displacement themselves for the last seven decades, and to the moral and political landscape of the Palestinian camp.

Throughout the chapters I often replace the term refugee with that of Palestinian and Syrian Wihdat resident. I do this for two main reasons. First, my interlocutors almost never referred to themselves and others as refugees in their conversations. They used people’s national belonging and background as points of reference. Hardly anyone talked about *Syrian refugees*, they talked about *Syrians*. The same applied to Palestinians. As such, calling them refugees in most instances is an etic concept and not an emic term.

Moreover, as this thesis will show, refugee-ness impacts many aspects of Palestinians’ and Syrians’ lives. However, while refugee-ness is often singled out, other elements and experiences might be just as—or more—important. I specifically tried not to treat refugee-ness as an identity marker, but as an experience that sometimes coexisted with other experiences, and other times was pushed to

the background. In cases where being a refugee is a fundamental element in the discussion, I move back to centralizing the refugee aspect. For example, in discussing marriage's crucial role in rebuilding social networks and intimate socialities among those who have been recently displaced, I mainly write about 'refugees' instead of Wihdat residents.

## DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS, DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS

As previously mentioned, the work of development organizations plays a central role in the lives of refugees, and in this thesis. In the early years of the establishment of the Kingdom of Jordan, and especially after the 1948 War and the arrival of thousands of Palestinians to the country, most organizations were voluntary-based societies that focused on welfare and charity. With the years, and following the second exodus of Palestinians in the aftermath of the 1967 War, a vibrant Palestinian civil society developed, including trade unions, and women's and teachers' organizations (Harmsen 2008: 83-84). A halt was put to the proliferation of Palestinian civil society in Jordan after clashes between the Jordanian army and Palestinian fighters in 1970, and the eviction of the local Palestinian leadership. Martial law, imposed since 1967, similarly constrained the work and formation of organizations and civil society institutions in Jordan more broadly (Clark and Michuki 2009: 330).

The following decades witnessed a shift in Jordan from charity-based work towards social development, both on the level of government and on the ground (Harmsen 2008: 155). The Ministry of Social Affairs changed its name to the Ministry of Social Development in 1979, and organizations shifted their focus to income-generating projects and economic empowerment, awareness-raising on women and children's rights, and public health issues (Ibid: 156). While the King of Jordan started processes of liberalization in the 1990s after more than two decades of martial law, and civil society thrived, critics argue that the work of civil society organizations is often under pressure. Organizations have to be officially registered with the Ministry of Social Development or another relevant ministry—a process that can take years. They are not allowed to 'pursue any political goals,' but the law provides little clarity on what counts as political (ICNL 2019). Moreover, Jordan has a record of closing down organizations, accusing them of failing to provide information and reports to the authorities, as an excuse to close down organizations it considers 'politically subversive' (Harmsen 2008: 162). These developments in Jordan can explain why in the last three decades many organizations

started to focus their work less on political programs and mobilization, and more on development.

Various organizations in Jordan assume responsibility for refugees and are engaged in managing refugee populations. Organizations that were active in and around Wihdat differed in scale, approach, discourse, and projects. Some organizations focused primarily on human rights and development projects, and employed the language of international law, women's and children's rights. Their projects aimed at developing education and the health system, in addition to raising awareness around laws and rights. Other organizations were more humanitarian in nature and aimed at providing basic needs to refugees and other populations considered vulnerable. Nevertheless, most organizations I came across combined various activities such as charity-based humanitarian aid with workshops aimed at human rights or religious education.

In this thesis, I use the term 'development organizations' as an umbrella term for these various organizations, including local, Jordanian, non-Jordanian and international humanitarian, rights-based, development, faith-based and charity organizations. I decided to bring in the various organizations under one term for easiness and consistency's sake. While at some points during the thesis the differences between organizations are important, and discussed, at other points they are trivial. Moreover, I chose the term 'development organization' as most organizations are concerned with development in one way or another, as the brief historic overview above showed. Development is a form of social change (De Sardan 2005: 23). It includes a set of actions and social processes undertaken by actors or institutions 'aimed at transferring a social milieu' through mobilizing 'material and symbolic resources' (Ibid: 24-25).<sup>7</sup> This is indeed what the organizations I discuss have in common. They design and implement projects and seek to reach beneficiaries with the aim of bringing change; whether by helping those most in need to have access to food and shelter, by providing Qur'an classes, or by lobbying for legal reform around women's rights.<sup>8</sup>

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7 While Olivier de Sardan argues that development is usually undertaken by actors who 'do not belong to the milieu in question' (2005: 24-25), I argue and show that much of the development work, even when designed on an international level or by employees that are in a way removed from the intervention site, is often implemented by local people who do consider themselves as belonging to the milieu in question. Others might feel that they belong in some respects (such as national background, religious affiliation or local customs) but differ in others (such as class). See Chapter Four for more on this.

8 While most development organizations aim to bring structural change, I should note that due to financial and other constraints some organizations' projects are more sporadic than structural.



There is a general conception of development organizations—many of which refer to themselves as non-governmental organizations—as being neutral, and as something in direct opposition to governance and governments (Fisher 1997: 442). These organizations are nevertheless implicated in techniques of governmentality and politics largely due to their role in managing refugees. For instance, UNRWA in the Palestinian camps in Jordan took on the role of a ‘government-in-exile’ that turned camps into ‘instruments to facilitate and manage its bureaucratic functions’ (Farah 2009b: 391-393). The UNRWA functioned as a ‘welfare state’ which issued identification cards to those it recognized and identified as ‘refugees,’ with rights and access to services tied to this card (Ibid: 397).

Discourse and knowledge production are central in the governmental practices of development organizations. These organizations use a specific humanitarian language in order to legitimize their work and interference (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010: 1119), and to label and decide who is a refugee deserving of specific rights (Ibid: 1128). However, discourses employed by development organizations are also co-opted, adopted and challenged by aid recipients. Beneficiaries who are aware of global rights discourses use that same vocabulary in order to demand rights and protection in their negotiations with aid agencies. Farah’s work on the UNRWA in Jordan is a relevant example. She argues that the UNRWA had the power to ‘label, organize, and classify populations, a process with real transformative consequence’ (Farah 2009b: 392). Refugees also ‘appropriate, renegotiate, or subvert humanitarian classifications and practices, and challenge the intentions and interests of more powerful actors’ (Ibid). They do this by using that same terminology as political symbols, and by demanding protection and rights from these organizations—among them the right of return to their home country (Ibid: 405). As a result, agencies such as UNRWA become important in reconstructing Palestinian identity and nationalism (Farah 2009b: Shabaneh 2010).

One chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the discursive knowledge production of international development organizations on marriage practices among refugees. I focus on the ways these organizations represent the refugee, and the narratives they employ in this representation. However, refugees do not only appropriate and co-opt these organizations’ discourses for their benefits. Local centres and organizations become an integral part of their daily lives and embedded in the wider social fabric, as refugees interact—often on a daily basis—with the various local centres that provide aid and services. I move beyond an investigation of the governmental practices of organizations to also look at how they are integrated in local social practices such as marriages and matchmaking.

## Palestinians and Syrians in Jordan

Jordan has a long and complicated history with its Palestinian residents. The first refugees arrived in Jordan after the 1948 War and the creation of the State of Israel. Palestinian refugees that were exiled to Jordan received Jordanian citizenship in addition to being registered with the UNRWA as refugees (De Bel-Air 2012: 6). When Jordan officially annexed the West Bank to its national territory in 1952, it granted citizenship to the residents of this area as well. At the time, the country was a newly established kingdom. Many Transjordanians considered the King who had come from the Hijaz in Saudi Arabia a foreigner and were reluctant to accept him as their leader.<sup>9</sup> The King had difficulty getting the local population under Hashemite rule and designed a 'patrimonial clientelism' system with the local tribes to strengthen people's loyalty (De Bel-Air 2012: 6). Accordingly, he employed local Transjordanians in state institutions and created a dependency on the new government for income, food, and water.

After the Six-Day War in 1967, more Palestinians arrived in Jordan and the Palestinian leadership moved its base there as well. Refugees became increasingly militarized, which resulted in tensions between Palestinians, local Transjordanians, and the Jordanian government. Palestinian fighters planned and operated attacks against Israel from Jordan, and Israel invaded Jordanian territory on several occasions and conducted assassinations of Palestinians. In addition, Palestinians carried arms, put up checkpoints, and did not always accept Jordanian sovereignty over their community (De Bel-Air 2012: 14). The government perceived Palestinians as a threat to the clientelist ties between the monarchy and the Transjordanians, and to Jordanian sovereignty in general. These tensions culminated in Black September, when fighting between Palestinian militias and Jordanian security forces under King Hussein erupted in 1970. The clashes resulted in the killing and injuring of Palestinians and Jordanians and the exile of the Palestinian leadership to Lebanon (De Bel-Air 2012: 14). Jordan had already announced martial law following the 1967 War and banned most political activity. State control was tightened further after the events of Black September.

Not all Palestinians in Jordan hold Jordanian citizenship.<sup>10</sup> Those referred to as 'Gazans,' double-displaced Palestinians that arrived in Jordan from Gaza after

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9 The term transjordanian refers to those that resided in the area of current day Jordan before the establishment of the Hashemite Kingdom in 1946, and were subjects of the British protectorate.

10 While in academic literature on Jordan and in conversations with interlocutors the concepts of nationality and citizenship were often used interchangeably, I will mainly use the term citizenship.

1967, were denied citizenship and the rights stemming from it and are legally stateless.<sup>11</sup> Categorized in Jordan as legal foreign residents, they have to renew their residency every three years (Perez 2010: 1034). Official Jordanian discourse justifies not providing them with citizenship by arguing that it would endanger their right to return to Palestine (Ibid). This argument is emboldened by Israeli statements that often refer to Jordan as the state for the Palestinians as an excuse to maintain their settlements in and occupation of Palestinian territories. Palestinians' right of return, however, is guaranteed in international law and is not revoked when becoming a citizen of another state.<sup>12</sup> By refusing Gazans citizenship and other basic rights they are entitled to as stateless people, Jordan exposes them to structural violence whose consequence is 'the social and economic impoverishment of an entire class of people as stateless refugees' (Perez 2016: 2).<sup>13</sup> Most Gazans lack access to public services, and can neither own property nor open a bank account.<sup>14</sup> Some families include both 'categories' of Palestinians. The family of Rana, the director of a local organization in East Amman, is originally from Yaffa. Her father ended up in Jordan after 1948 while her uncles all fled to Rafah in the Gaza Strip, to settle in Jordan after 1967. Recounting the difficulties her cousins faced in renewing their temporary residences, she exclaimed 'I have a *jinsiyya* [citizenship], elhamdulillah!'

At the end of the twentieth century, estimates put the percentage of Palestinian-Jordanians in Jordan at around half of the total population. There are ten officially recognized Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan (and three unofficial camps) in which one-third of the refugees live. The rest live in other mainly urban areas.

Syrian refugees have a much more recent history in Jordan, and are in many respects in a different social and political position to the Palestinians. Following a

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11 Referring to these residents as 'Gazans' is often an inaccurate description. As many stress, they are not actually Gazans but from other towns and villages in Palestine who found refuge in Gaza after the 1948 War. Some of those Palestinians lacking citizenship are actually Palestinians who found jobs in Iraq and the Gulf countries but came to Jordan after they were expelled due to the Gulf wars.

12 While in most cases refugees would lose their refugee status with naturalization, Palestinians fall under an exception as this does not apply to refugees who are protected or assisted by a United Nations section other than the UNHCR (Deeb 2016).

13 Perez provides a compelling argument for demanding more rights for Gazan-Palestinians in Jordan based on universal human rights for the stateless instead of focusing on demanding rights through citizenship only (2010).

14 Some exceptions were recently given to children of Gazan fathers and Jordanian mothers, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

popular uprising in 2011 that turned into a brutal civil war, more and more Syrians fleeing the war started arriving in Jordan. The Jordanian government together with international organizations set up Za'atari camp in 2012 in the north of Jordan on its border with Syria. In the first years of the Syrian conflict, Syrians were allowed into Jordan according to its Law of Residency and Foreigners' Affairs. Syrians could cross the border using their passport only and did not need a visa or residency permit (Achilli 2015: 3). Jordan, however, established a 'guarantor' system, ultimately trapping Syrians in the camp unless a Jordanian citizen 'bailed them out' and took responsibility for them. During the last seven years four other official camps for Syrians were set up in addition to numerous unofficial settlements. Jordan has attempted to keep Syrians within the borders of the camps but over two-thirds of the Syrians in Jordan live outside of them in urban and rural areas. The official count of Syrians in Jordan according to the UNHCR is 660,393<sup>15</sup> (Operational Portal Refugee Situations n.d.) out of a Jordanian population of a little over ten million (Worldometers n.d.). A more accurate estimation would be around one million Syrian residents (Tobin 2018: 225)

Jordan has been limiting access to Syrians since 2014, either by refusing to let Syrians in, or by *refoulement*<sup>16</sup> (Achilli 2015: 4). As a result, many Syrians started entering Jordan illegally. A year earlier, in 2013, Jordan stopped issuing work permits for Syrians, and is penalizing local businesses that employ Syrians illegally (Davis and Taylor 2013: 11). While Jordan cancelled the bail out system in 2015, it instructed the UNHCR, which issues the Asylum Seeker Certificates (ASCs) that provides refugees with residency rights and access to services, to stop issuing the cards to Syrians that left the camps without the necessary and correct 'bail out' documents (Achilli 2015: 5).

The Jordanian government granted most legally residing Syrians access to health and education facilities. Humanitarian assistance and temporary protection is granted by the UNHCR, and Syrians often rely heavily on the various humanitarian and charity organizations. Despite the available assistance, several UN reports and assessments of Syrians in Jordan show that Syrians face many difficulties. Rental costs are high, and Syrians can only find low-paying jobs, if any at all. Many families are not aware of their ability to access clinics and are reluctant to send their children to schools—either out of fear, lack of transport, or because these children need to work and contribute to the family's income. After a donor's con-

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15 These statistics indicate the number of officially registered Syrian refugees on 9 April 2019.

16 *Refoulement* refers to the forcible return of refugees and asylum seekers to a country in which they fear persecution. Non-refoulement is a central principle of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

ference in London in 2016, Jordan promised to open up the labour market to Syrian refugees, but the project made slow progress, and seemed to be facing many implementation difficulties (Turner 2016).

By including both the Palestinians and Syrians in this thesis I enrich the research on many levels. As the overview above shows, their experiences of displacement, the conflict that caused their displacement, their settlement and history in Jordan, their legal status, and their position in larger geopolitical conflicts are very different. One cannot talk about a single blueprint for the experience of displacement, as it depends on many variables and can change over time and through space. What sets most Syrians apart from Palestinians in Jordan is that the latter have spent most if not all their life in Jordan—while Syrian families have only recently been displaced, with memories of the homeland and the traumas of war still fresh. Another important difference is the fact that Palestinians were displaced as a result of a settler-colonial project (Wolfe 2006, Salamanca et. al. 2012), and with the protraction of their displacement and the geopolitical context they have no short-term prospect of a return to Palestine. Syrians at the time of research, on the other hand, were actively waiting and hoping for the war in their country to end. Sometimes, these differences had a direct impact on the themes discussed throughout the chapters. Other times, Palestinians and Syrians faced similar obstacles and shared comparable experiences.

## The research location: Wihdat Camp

I conducted my main research for this thesis in Wihdat Camp in East Amman, a Palestinian camp that was set up by UNRWA in 1955. While the majority of its residents are Palestinian refugees (including those with and without Jordanian citizenship), Wihdat Camp also houses a few Iraqi families, migrants from Egypt and Bangladesh, some Jordanian families and more recently also Syrian refugees. Wihdat, officially named Amman New Camp,<sup>17</sup> is currently built on 0,48 square kilometres and houses 57,000 registered refugees (UNRWA n.d.).<sup>18</sup> Over time all zinc-sheet shelters have been replaced with concrete buildings. While in a few places one can still detect the original residence unit, most houses have gained additional rooms and floors. Throughout Wihdat are big blue and white building

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17 The word 'Wihda' was used to refer to the original shelter unit, and its plural, 'Wihdat,' became the term locally used to refer to the camp.

18 In addition to more unregistered residents.

blocks. These are UNRWA buildings: schools, clinics and offices. The narrow streets and electric cables above one's head are a sign of the mostly bad infrastructure.

Wihdat has become an important commercial centre in Amman. Many of the UNRWA shelters were sold by the original residents and were turned into shops. Wihdat market is known throughout Amman and many people from other neighbourhoods come to shop there because of its wide assortment of shops and stands. It has a large collection of clothes, vegetables and fruits, as well as household objects. People that go shopping can hire a carriage that is usually steered by a boy (sometimes men), for a small price. Many of the Palestinian and Syrian families I met had sons (and husbands) working on a carriage in the market. Another job available to young boys was to help a fruit or vegetable vendor on his stand. Deeper into the camp are tens of shops: lingerie next to children's clothes, party dresses and shoes. The market became a very important symbol to its Palestinian residents as it demonstrates both their integration into Jordan and their capacity to struggle against the difficulties presented by their exile (Achilli 2015: 5).

To most residents and Jordanian officials, Wihdat is a Palestinian space.<sup>19</sup> Walls and murals are covered with drawings that symbolize Palestine, and local centres and streets are named after Palestinian villages. When Palestinians settled in Wihdat in the 1950s they actively shaped the landscape, as Palestinians from the same villages attempted to live together (Achilli 2008: 10). They recreated the social structure of the lost homeland and forged a Palestinian collective identity by passing 'detailed memory of village land and life to younger generations' (Ibid).

Wihdat is also a politically charged space, mainly due to its role in the Palestinian national movement, and more recently because of its current football team. First and second generation Wihdat residents recounted to me the role of Wihdat during Black September. Palestinian fighters held headquarters or resided in Wihdat, which led the Jordanian army to heavily shell and fire on the camp. Until today Palestinians refer to the massacre on the 'Nadi Street' where Jordanian soldiers killed many Palestinian fighters. Wihdat was also a strategic location as no-one knew the streets and passages as well as Wihdat residents. During Black September Palestinian guerrilla fighters kidnapped a group of tourists, hid them in the camp, and moved them from one house to another so as to keep them hidden.<sup>20</sup> It was the takeover of Wihdat by the Jordanian army that marked the end of the clashes of Black September (Hamarneh 2002).

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19 See also Achilli who says the same (2008: 11).

20 As communicated to me in an interview by a woman who lived in Wihdat during that time and was involved in the fights.

After the imposition of martial law and the events of Black September, the State still had difficulty exerting its rule on the Palestinian camps. One friend joked to me about Wihdat in the 1980s saying: 'policemen that dared enter Wihdat were never seen leaving again.' The Jordanian government has since constructed wide roads, reclaiming control over the area, and opened a police station on the edge of Wihdat with police conducting unannounced sweeps every once in a while.

As political activism was repressed, football became a political act and one of the venues for Palestinians in Jordan to express their Palestinian-ness. One of the most well-known and successful Jordanian football clubs is Nadi Al-Wihdat (Al-Wehdat). The team started off as one of the youth programmes of the local club, under the umbrella of the UNRWA. They began competing in the Jordanian league in the 1970s and won the championship in 1980. The team stood as a symbol for Palestinian nationalism in a politically charged Jordan, especially in the 1980s when even the slightest political activity could easily be deemed illegal. Clashes and fights often erupted when they played against the Al-Faisali club, known to have its support base among Transjordanian residents loyal to the King. After being banned for a period, and later placed under the responsibility of Jordanian officials, Wihdat has regained some of its control over the club in the last two decades. The atmosphere during matches often stays tense and clashes with Jordanian fans often flare up. Palestinians blame the Jordanian police for provoking the fans and escalating tensions, while many Jordanian residents blame Wihdat fans for hooliganism and causing chaos.

Syrians have been moving to Wihdat since 2012. The combination of the existing organizations in East Amman that provide charity and aid, the cheaper apartments, and the availability of jobs at the Wihdat market made Wihdat and its surrounding neighbourhoods an attractive place for Syrian families to settle. Some also had relatives or acquaintances already living in the neighbourhood that facilitated their settlement there. Syrians often reflected on the similarities and differences of their way of living in Wihdat compared to how it was in Syria. With variations depending on where they came from, most of them missed the greenery and nature of Syria but agreed that the 'character' of East Amman and the simplicity of the people felt familiar.

The research for this thesis was mainly conducted with Syrian and Palestinian residents of Wihdat. The material and normative landscape of Wihdat, its history, and its position in Amman are all important aspects that come up throughout this thesis. I often discuss Wihdat residents in general, referring to both Syrians and Palestinians. At other points it is necessary to differentiate between the two groups and accentuate the differences between them. While realizing that there are differences in status, background, and senses of belonging within each nation-

al group, the contrast between the Palestinian and the Syrian experience remains relevant.

## Fieldwork and methodology

I went to Amman in January 2016 together with my seven-month-old daughter and my sixty-four-year-old Palestinian father. We spent the first two weeks settling in Amman. We got in touch with acquaintances who I hoped could help me find contacts and a place to rent in Wihdat. Most people I met those first weeks advised me against living in Wihdat. Some explained in subtle ways that they thought I would probably feel uncomfortable because people lived in close proximity to each other in the camp. Others were less subtle and stated that Wihdat was a problematic area, that it had *zu'ran* [troublemakers], and that many fights took place there. Luckily—and I suspect because these acquaintances realized that my father supported my decision to live in or as close as possible to Wihdat—I eventually received much-needed help.

The apartment I ultimately found was not located in Wihdat, but a five-minute walk away, in the neighbourhood of Ashrafiyya, where I stayed until the end of my ethnographic research in December of that year. The fact that my father accompanied me those first weeks was instrumental in preparing for my fieldwork. The extra pair of hands came in very handy with a baby in the house. He also helped me negotiate a good deal for the apartment, bought me a washing machine, and together we figured out how things worked in Jordan—from installing the internet and finding a day-care, to navigating the city with public transportation and taxis.

My fieldwork began with the acquaintance of a man in Wihdat. Hassan, a shop-owner who grew up in Wihdat, was very active locally and knew directors of local centres and other residents active in the camp. A friend of his, Shatha, became my closest friend during research. She worked at a local community centre and was an active member of a political party.<sup>21</sup> This provided her with wide social networks to which she introduced me. Through her I met most of my Palestinian interlocutors in the first few months. She introduced me to people at local centres and took me with her to visit her friends and relatives.

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21 Shatha has been active in Palestinian political parties since her late teens. Since their illegalization in Jordan she became a member of a Jordanian party that focuses on both Jordanian internal matters and on the Palestinian cause. Through her activism she gained many contacts that are politically active inside and outside of the camp.



After visiting a local women's centre, the director Suheir expressed her willingness to help me as much as she could, as she found it very important to encourage young Palestinian women in their academic trajectories. She gave me access to women that attended her centre and put me in touch with people I wanted to talk to. I also volunteered at her centre teaching English to women and children of the area. I did that for about six months, during which I also held a few focus-group discussions with the women that attended my classes around the topics of this thesis. A few months into my fieldwork the women's centre hosted a workshop aimed at Syrian women. I took the phone numbers of most of the twenty women that attended, asking them whether I could call them to arrange for visits later on. These women were very open and kind, and were my main entry point to meeting most of my Syrian interlocutors.

I interviewed my Palestinian and Syrian interlocutors in their homes, I accompanied them to the workshops they attended at local centres, and I was often invited to come along on social visits. I also approached various local and international organizations in and outside of Wihdat as I intended to investigate their role in marriage practices among refugees. I was able to interview many employees of these organizations. I also participated in some of their projects and attended workshops, spending many hours in the company of the employees and the women and men visiting these organizations.

Having worked on Palestine-related issues throughout most of my academic career, and having grown up in a Palestinian town in Israel, I was happy to conduct this lengthy study on Palestinians. I was excited by the new challenge, as this time I would do research on Palestinians with whom I had not been intensely in contact with before. Not Palestinian citizens of Israel, nor Palestinians of the West-Bank and the Gaza Strip—but Palestinians in Jordan. To my surprise, however, I noticed throughout fieldwork that I felt more comfortable spending time with my Syrian interlocutors than with many of the Palestinians. Especially during social visits I loved spending time with the Syrian women I got to know, and I believe this is one of the reasons that even though there were fewer Syrians than Palestinian, both among my respondents and in Wihdat as a whole, much of my ethnographic material is on the Syrian experience.

This variation in comfort led me to reflect on myself, my assumptions, and on what it meant to conduct ethnographic fieldwork and participant-observation as a method. Even though I was fully aware that Palestinians' experiences and lives in Jordan would be very different from mine, I identified as Palestinian and assumed I would feel an instant affinity with Palestinians in Jordan because of our joint national cause and background. I asked myself what was wrong. During several encounters and some arguments that erupted between me and my interlocutors,

I realized two things. First, to my Palestinian interlocutors Palestine was a cause, an abstract ideal, a symbol of what was lost and what they were unable to attain. To me, Palestine was my home, a place where people lived their daily lives. What to me was normal, such as drinking sage-tea from our garden in Palestine, was to many interlocutors a dream: to drink from the leaves of the homeland. My friend Shatha thus asked me one day to bring mint and sage leaves from my parents' garden so her eighty-year-old father could drink from the land of Palestine. Similarly, Hassan showed me with pride stones and dirt someone had gotten him from Tabariyya, the Palestinian town his family was originally from. If he was unable to reach his land in Palestine, at least part of the land reached him. He had put the dirt and stones in a vase in his shop in Wihdat for everyone to see. Items that were normally available to me in abundance—tea leaves and stones from Palestine—were symbols that filled Shatha and Hassan with deep emotions.

Second, as I was seen as someone coming from 'the homeland,' I often felt that interlocutors believed I had to represent the quintessential Palestinian—from manner of dress and the use of certain words, to religious practice and behaviour. This created some interesting discussions that at times got heated. I found myself trying to convince my interlocutors that not all Palestinian-Muslims wear a headscarf and that some Palestinian families do hold gender-mixed weddings. Many interlocutors were surprised, as to them that was not how Palestinians did things. At the same time I had to explain myself and aspects of my life while attempting to not be accused of being impacted too much by 'the West' or by Israel.

Syrian interlocutors, on the other hand, had fewer expectations of what I was supposed to be, and what it meant to be Palestinian. They did not really care. Therefore, I could more easily show my ignorance and ask questions, and talk about them rather than about myself and where I came from. I liked that.

Personal reflections made me realize that my national identification was influenced by my own experience of what it meant to be Palestinian. When meeting Palestinians in other parts of the world, the first question we usually ask each other is where in Palestine we were from, and there is often an instant feeling of connection, no matter how short-lived or ephemeral. Similarly, having grown up as a Palestinian in Israel, where as a minority Palestinians' existence is always questioned and challenged, that part of my identity often overpowered other aspects. Fieldwork was a reminder that (of course) there are different experiences of what it meant to be Palestinian, and that it was important to remain open to how these other Palestinians made sense of the world.

Anthropologists have long passed the stage in which they consider ethnographic research that of an 'outsider' becoming more of an 'insider' through ethnographic research and participant-observation. While researchers talk about indige-

nous ethnographers, partial insiders (Sherif 2001), and halfies (Abu-Lughod 1991), they also recognize that boundaries are blurred (Sherif 2001) and that identifications shift, are multiple and crosscutting (Narayan 1993). Narayan calls for viewing anthropologists 'in terms of shifting identifications amid a field of interpenetrating communities and power relations' (1993: 671), in which the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' anthropologist is broken down. These developments in anthropology show that considering oneself or being considered by others as an outsider or insider might be less relevant to ethnographic research than the analytical gaze the researcher brings along. Having said that, my fieldwork experience made me realize that in this case, being considered more of an outsider with not much expectation attached impacted my dynamics with Syrian interlocutors, easing my contact with them as compared to Palestinian interlocutors, and therefore facilitated my ethnographic research.

Situating oneself in the field is not limited to national boundaries. Other aspects of my personality and background were important as well. Ghadeer, a young Jordanian mother married to Sami, a Gazan, were my neighbours in the apartment building, and I spent many days in their house. Ghadeer worked as an assistant at a school, while Sami worked twelve-hour shifts at a restaurant for seven days a week. As he was Gazan, he was unable to find a job with decent working conditions and a contract. They also had many expenses as Sami and their son did not have Jordanian citizenship and thus had no access to many public services. I saw how they struggled to live from month to month to pay the rent and cover all the necessary expenses. Simultaneously, I used my gluten allergy as an excuse to take my daughter once every few weeks to one of the fancy malls in Amman and buy imported groceries and gluten-free products, and spend a few hours at a chic cafe. What I spent on that one day amounted to half the salary of Ghadeer. Actually, I was financially much better off than the great majority of the residents around me, a fact I was confronted with every day I walked those streets and entered people's homes. While I did not live an extravagant life (except for those shopping sprees at the mall), I did try to always take something with me when I visited interlocutors at home such as delicacies or a present.

One aspect that definitely aided my research was that just like my interlocutors, Arabic was my mother-tongue. This did not prevent me from having to learn some words and concepts I was unfamiliar with, or my interlocutors from making fun of my dialect or misunderstanding what I was saying. Shatha often commented that I reminded her of her grandmother as I used old Palestinian words that the current Palestinian generation in Jordan had stopped using.

Wihdat residents were familiar with 'researchers.' I realized that in the first weeks of fieldwork when Wihdat residents introduced me to their acquaintances.

I usually stated to my interlocutors that I was interested in marriages in the camp, how people thought and talked about marriages and how they were concluded. Interlocutors that were politically and socially active in the camp often rephrased my words when introducing me to others by saying that I was a student or researcher either studying 'the conditions of the camp' or 'early marriage'. I perceived this as a hint that several researchers had preceded me who were interested in those specific themes.<sup>22</sup>

My independence—the fact that I lived on my own with my daughter, and that I was not associated with any specific family or organization—helped in my ability to talk to a variety of actors. This was especially important as there was some political upheaval during my time there between various actors in Wihdat over the running of the local centres and the camp committee. Even though I became a known face in the neighbourhood and often felt observed, this did not limit my mobility within and outside of the camp. I noticed at some point during fieldwork that I had not met many men from Wihdat, a bias I tried to balance in the last months of fieldwork. My difficulty getting to know men helped me to better understand the expected gender behaviour and the limited opportunities for gender-mixing. Besides meeting male vendors at the market or employees of the various centres I visited, in most houses women and men sat in separate areas. Therefore, unsurprisingly, much of my fieldwork material concerns women.<sup>23</sup>

I conducted ethnographic research for ten and a half months in 2016. As I was able to stay out of local conflicts, my presence neither endangered myself nor any of my interlocutors. I had heard that non-Jordanian researchers were officially obliged to request a research permit, but since I was affiliated with the Jordan University this allowed me to conduct research without such a permit. I conducted seventy-nine individual interviews but had many more informal conversations. While I met and talked to some interlocutors only once, I met or ran into many of them repeatedly. My questions and interests did not touch on sensitive topics, but some conversations included private details. As I promised my interlocutors, they are all anonymized in this thesis. Most interlocutors were open and willing to share their stories, and often led me to other acquaintances of theirs they thought I should talk

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22 Not long before I arrived in Wihdat Luigi Achilli had concluded his research there. Many interlocutors remembered him fondly. Others who have done research on Wihdat include Feldman (2015b), Perez (2011 dissertation), Bjawi-Levine (2009), and Jaber (1996). Some families told me that they had hosted university students who came to live in Amman for a month for research. I assumed they were mainly talking about MA students.

23 It was very interesting to see how the work of Luigi Achilli, who similarly conducted fieldwork in Wihdat, complements my research by focusing on the experiences and perspectives of men. See for example Achilli (2015b) and Achilli (2018).

to. Others did not understand where exactly my interest lay nor why I would be curious about their lives. Nevertheless, all of them provided me with important insights, and just as with any other ethnographic research, they are the core of this thesis.

## The chapters

These introductory pages form the first chapter of this thesis. The second chapter illustrates the importance of investigating the role of place in displacement. While displacement evokes the idea that people have lost a certain place of belonging, the place of refuge, new attachments and senses of belonging that emerge in exile are central elements of the refugee experience that play an important role in marriage practices, such as choice of partners, matchmaking processes, and marriage conclusion. This chapter sketches how Wihdat residents get married, from the initial steps of the matchmaking until the wedding. In Wihdat, the normative landscape around gender behaviour in the camp influences marriage practices. Women's role in matchmaking becomes central because of the limited space for gender-mixing between unrelated men and women. As such, women take on the responsibility of looking for a suitable bride for their male relatives.

Marriage practices in Wihdat also expose the different relations Palestinians and Syrians have to the camp. Wihdat is an important identity marker for its Palestinian residents. As such, Palestinians locate practices around engagement and marriage registration in their specific East Amman and camp identity. Syrian residents who were accustomed to somewhat different marriage practices in their homeland are often keenly aware of these differences, and sometimes find themselves struggling to adapt to the specific normative behaviour and marriage expectations of the camp.

In addition to paying attention to the role of the camp in marriage practices, I show the importance of locating marriages in a historical and political context. The prospect of a return to the homeland, the nature of displacement, and the legal status of refugees in Jordan all play an important role in marriage practices. They often do so differently for the Palestinians who have now spent seven decades in exile, and the Syrians, who have a much shorter history of displacement. What many Wihdat residents have in common, however, is their view on what constitutes the basis for a successful marriage: being well-acquainted before marriage and mutual understanding between the couple. My analysis of these elements offers a critique on the centralization of a dichotomous understanding of concepts of love-based and traditional marriages in much of the academic literature. An addi-

tional central feature of marriage discourses in Wihdat was referring to people according to their national background. As such, Marriage discourses highlight which marriages cross boundaries of the familiar and the desired, while simultaneously showing the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of the different identifications in such discourses.

While Chapter Two shows the complex ways in which displacement influences marriage practices, in Chapter Three I turn my attention to the analysis of a specific development narrative in which displacement appears to have a clear and linear impact on marriage practices among refugees. Many Jordanian and international development organizations direct their intervention campaigns towards the prevention of early marriages through lobbying for legal reform and awareness campaigns. These organizations also conduct studies on the prevalence of early marriages in Jordan and among its refugee populations. This chapter analyses the narrative on early marriage these development organizations produce through an analysis of two key documents.

According to this development narrative, displacement and poverty combined with local cultural norms lead to early marriages, of which young refugee girls are the victims. I complicate this narrative using ethnographic material, showing that while refugee families live in precarious conditions due to their displacement and its aftermath, refugee girls nonetheless consider themselves active participants in their marriages. Moreover, the proposed interventions that these organizations suggest based on this narrative often remain small-scale, depoliticized, and irrelevant to the daily realities of refugees in Jordan.

In Wihdat, most projects that target marriage practices come in the form of awareness workshops. Chapter Four shows that such projects can have unintended consequences and that their impact on marriage lies elsewhere. I first illustrate how these workshops get sidetracked and reach their audiences in unintended ways. Local organizations play an important role in this process, as they implement projects that are designed on national and international scale within local communities. Those providing the workshops change and adapt the content of the project based on prior assumptions they hold about the targeted beneficiaries—assumptions that are influenced by local social and economic inequalities.

These organizations usually implement their projects through local centres in and around Wihdat. More than the content of their workshops, the impact of their work on marriage practices lies in the spaces these local centres provide. By targeting a wide variety of women, local centres facilitate new forms of female sociability and extend the social networks available to Syrian and Palestinian Wihdat women. These centres add to the existing spaces and networks through which Wihdat residents can find a spouse. This chapter shows the embeddedness of lo-

cal centres in the lives of residents, and the important role they play in women's matchmaking practices.

The fifth chapter addresses aspects of marriage in displacement that are ignored by development reports but are essential to refugees. One of the areas on which displacement has a big impact is the shattering of social networks. Especially in the first years following displacement, people deal with the loss of loved ones caused by the conflict, and the dispersion of family members all over the region. This chapter argues that marriage emerges as a particular aspiration in displacement because of its affective dimension and its role in rebuilding new social networks and intimacies.

Similar to Chapter Two, this chapter brings to the fore some of the differences between Syrian and Palestinian refugee-ness. Palestinians, whose exile was a product of a settler-colonial project in Palestine, live in a protracted state of displacement. While they do not give up on their right to return to Palestine, they recognize that their near future is in Jordan. The future is of a more uncertain character for Syrian refugees in Jordan, as they hope for an imminent return as soon as the situation in Syria will allow for it. Ethnographic material shows how Syrians engage with both the uncertainty and the potentiality of the future, in which marriages play a central role. Deciding on a marriage and a marriage partner is influenced by the hope of returning to a post-war Syria as soon as possible. Marriage is simultaneously a step Syrians undertook in order to improve their present life in Amman, and recreate a sense of home—a home embodied not by structures, but by people and social connections.

In Chapter Six I conclude with several points on what the case of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Jordan can illustrate for the interplay between marriage and displacement beyond the specificities of this research. I argue for the importance of looking at the role of marriage in the senses of belonging, identities, attachments that develop in displacement, and processes of emplacement and home-making refugees engage in. While I recognize that displacement impacts refugee lives in complex ways, it is imperative to examine *how* and *why* aspects of their lives are impacted by displacement and its aftermath, and how refugees as social actors navigate these conditions.





Embroidery of a Palestinian wedding scene, hanging at a local centre in Wihdat Camp.  
Photo taken by author.



## Chapter Two



Marriage Practices in  
Wihdat: Matchmaking,  
Mutual Understanding and  
National Belonging

# Marriage Practices in Wihdat: Matchmaking, Mutual Understanding and National Belonging

This chapter introduces the main marriage practices and discourses Wihdat residents engage in, and shows that marriage is subject to complex social, spatial and legal structures that people navigate and reflect on differently depending on their experiences and positionalities.<sup>24</sup> By including ethnographic material of Syrian and Palestinian Wihdat residents, the chapter argues for the importance of considering the spatial and social character of Wihdat, Palestinians' and Syrians' histories of displacement, as well as their legal and social positionality in Jordan. Marriage emerges as a dynamic social practice that exposes the importance of specific concepts, places, and identities.

Marriages in Jordan are regulated by the Personal Status Law.<sup>25</sup> The Jordanian Constitution names Islam as the state religion, and has accordingly subsumed personal status cases for Muslims, including marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody, under Sharia courts (Amawi 2000: 168).<sup>26</sup> The Personal Status Law applies to all residents of the Jordanian Kingdom, including Palestinian and Syrian refugees. Jordan also has other legal provisions that impact marriages but fall outside of the Personal Status Law. The Nationality Law that regulates the passing of citizenship is one such case, and will also be discussed in this chapter.

Issues related to marriages are debated among Wihdat residents in addition to politicians, religious figures and Jordanian and international organizations. Debated themes vary from the proper way to conclude and register a marriage, to

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24 Parts of this chapter are based on previously published work. See Zbeidy (2018).

25 The current Personal Status Law is based on the one established in 1976 and was partially modified in 2001 and 2010.

26 Eleven Christian denominations are also recognized in Jordan, and their respective religious courts administer each denomination's personal status laws (Amawi 2000: 167).

the regulation of engagement periods and the passing of nationality. This chapter introduces these debates and discourses as they pertain to Wihdat residents.

I start with laying out how residents find a spouse in the normative landscape of Wihdat, and the important role women play in matchmaking efforts due to expected gender behaviour and gender segregation in the camp. While Palestinians locate their marriage practices in their specific East Amman and camp identity, Syrian families—who were used to somewhat different engagement and marriage practices—find themselves struggling to adapt to the specific normative behaviours and marriage expectations of the camp. In addition to locating marriage practices in East Amman's Wihdat Camp, the chapter shows that marriage practices change according to historical and political developments. It is therefore important to locate this research in a specific historical moment: in the seventh decade of the Palestinian exile, and the first decade of the Syrian war.

The second section focuses on the discourses of Wihdat residents around what they believe constitutes the basis for a successful marriage. I complicate the centrality of the opposition between traditionally arranged and love-based marriages in much of the literature on the topic, by showing that for my interlocutors the central issue was not whether traditional or love-based marriages were more desirable, but the extent to which it was necessary and desirable for a couple to be acquainted with each other before the wedding. In addition to debating the importance of getting well acquainted, a concept which for residents made a central contribution to a successful marriage was that of *tafahom*: mutual understanding. Personal and communal characteristics could contribute to mutual understanding between a couple, and when meeting a possible prospective partner, individuals and families stressed specific attributes that to them were important for mutual understanding. This shows that instead of only focusing on concepts of tradition and love as a basis for marriage, other concepts might just be as—or more—important.

In the final section, I shift the debate to matters of nationality. A central feature of marriage discourses in Wihdat was referring to people according to their national background. Other attributes of a future spouse, such as religion and class, were often self-evident and not highlighted in marriage discourses in Wihdat. National belonging, on the other hand, usually stood in for cultural background and indicated a degree of familiarity desirable in a marriage match. Since identifications are fluid and multiple, I do not consider identities as rooted in a specific notion of a homeland. The 'homeland' functions as a unifying symbol for displaced people (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 11), but so do new attachments and senses of belonging that emerge in exile. Palestinians who continuously affirmed their connection to Palestine and their wish for return, simultaneously identified

as Jordanian and considered having Jordanian citizenship of high importance in order to enjoy social and political rights. The legal status of a prospective spouse thus played a significant role in marriage choices. As the Syria conflict at the time of research had not yet turned into a protracted conflict similar to the Palestinian case, Syrian families placed less importance on the legal status in Jordan and focused on the practicalities that would facilitate a return to a post-war Syria, preferring marriages to Syrians regardless of legal status in Jordan.

## Finding a spouse and getting married in Wihdat

Rahaf was a twenty-year-old woman from Ashrafiyya, the neighbourhood bordering Wihdat. While following Qur'an lessons at a local Wihdat centre, she was approached by a woman who took classes with her and asked if she could visit Rahaf at her home. During the visit and in the company of Rahaf's mother, the real purpose of the visit came to light. The woman was interested in Rahaf as a bride for her twenty-seven-year-old son Karim. As Rahaf was looking forward to getting engaged, she agreed to a second visit. Karim accompanied his mother, and he and Rahaf got the chance to meet. Rahaf served him coffee and sat down with the two families but hardly uttered a word. She noticed that Karim was good-looking, and she thought he seemed kind. When Karim and his mother left the house, he let his mother know that he liked Rahaf and was interested in going forward with the matching efforts. Karim's mother called Rahaf's mother to inform her of her son's decision. Since Rahaf was interested in him as well, her brothers went on an expedition to ask about Karim's reputation in his neighbourhood and at his work. Rahaf's father had passed away several years earlier, and thus the responsibility fell on her brothers to ensure the good character of the groom and to give the green light to a marriage agreement. This depended to a large extent on the feedback the brothers received about Karim. The family had heard only positive things about him, and after several days of asking about Karim in his social circles, the brothers agreed to the match.

One week after the positive answer to the marriage proposal, Karim and his family came to Rahaf's house and they read the *fatiha*, making the marriage agreement official. Karim wanted to conclude the marriage contract, the *kitab*, that same week, as many couples concluded the contract to indicate the official start of their engagement period. But Rahaf preferred to wait a month instead of rushing into

concluding a marriage contract. The couple did not talk or meet until they went to court and concluded the *kitab*. As Rahaf said, 'we went to court together, with my brothers, and he did not look at me during the *kitab*, until we had signed.' They had planned an engagement party one week later, and it was during this week that they started regularly talking to each other on the phone. Since the engagement party Karim has also been coming for weekly visits.

Rahaf and Karim's meeting reflects the common process of a couple's acquaintance in and around Wihdat, which starts with matchmaking efforts led by women. Wihdat's social organization leaves little space for men and women to freely interact and meet each other, increasing the importance of women who have access to female spaces to search for marriage candidates for their male kin. Some local organizations and the marketplace provide for spaces for men and women to meet, but normative social behaviour limits the possibilities for men and women who have no familial or other socially sanctioned ties to freely interact. Thus, women take on the responsibility to ask friends and relatives whether they know of a suitable bride. They search during weddings and while following workshops at the various local organizations and centres; spaces that are largely gender-segregated.

When the mother of a prospective groom meets a woman she likes, she approaches her or her mother to ask for a visit. Unless the bride's family is not interested in marriage at all, they usually accept—welcoming the groom's mother for an initial visit—if not out of real interest then out of curiosity and courtesy. This first visit is a female event, and usually includes the mother of the groom together with a daughter or sister, and is welcomed by the prospective bride and her mother, who are sometimes joined by other female relatives. The two families get to know each other and ask questions. The bride can ask to see the groom's picture, and inquire about his job, health, religiosity and anything else she might want to know. The mother of the groom gets to see the young woman from up close and can inquire whether the bride plans to work or continue her studies. This visit is a crucial step in any future match, as it is here that both parties decide whether they want to move forward in their marital pursuit, or whether they have irreconcilable differences and expectations of the match.

If the groom's mother finds the first visit to be successful and she hears no negative stories about the bride or her family that might convince her otherwise, she will call the bride's mother to request a second visit, this time accompanied by the groom. The bride is asked by her mother whether she is interested in meeting the groom, a request that can be turned down for a variety of reasons. The young woman might not take a liking to the groom's mother, or disagree with their future place of residence. One interlocutor had turned a mother down because the family

had relatives with health problems and she was afraid their condition was hereditary, and would thus affect any future children she might have with him. Another interlocutor did not like the fact that the groom was already thirty-five years old and still worked under another boss instead of having his own business. In cases where the prospective bride has no objections to a second visit or is convinced by her mother or sisters to give the family another chance, a second visit will soon follow. This time, the groom joins in, and often the father or brothers of the bride join as well. The couple gets to meet, and to talk briefly if they so wish and dare in front of the gazing eyes of the families. In most of my interlocutors' accounts, the women decided to remain quiet and let the parents do most of the talking, while they tried to get a sense of the man's personality and attitude.

If the man and the woman are interested in each other, a period of investigation and enquiry about the prospective spouse follows. This is especially important when the two families are not already familiar with each other. The brothers and father of the bride have a huge responsibility to thoroughly investigate the groom's reputation. They go to the man's workplace, his neighbourhood, and his mosque. Female relatives on both sides will also ask neighbours about the respective family's reputation.

Interlocutors put a lot of emphasis on the importance of this investigation phase. Many of my female interlocutors blamed their brothers for not being thorough enough in their investigation, leading them to end up in unhappy marriages. However, they also explained that when they were themselves approached by a party asking about someone they knew, they often refrained from giving out too many details, as they wanted neither to carry the responsibility of stopping a match, nor to be accused of gossiping about neighbours. This investigation phase exposed the sometimes-contradictory social responsibilities of Wihdat residents in marriages. On the one hand a successful match depended on the reputation one had, which was the families' duty to make sure of; while on the other hand accusations of gossiping and covert motivations to prevent a match worried people, and often stopped them from sharing any negative attributes or stories they might know of regarding the prospective spouse and their family.

The extent and length of the investigation phase depend on whether the families already know each other and have a cordial relationship. Less investigation is necessary if the marriage candidate is categorized as a *qarib*, someone close. *Qaraba*, closeness, refers to kinship, but may also include other individual and communal characteristics, such as class, location, religion, and political affiliation (Moors 1995; Johnson et. al. 2009: 11-35). Some families assume that those who are considered familiar and close to be more desirable as spouses. In the case of a proposal from a family relative, for example, less investigation is necessary as

the families supposedly know each other well. However, this previous knowledge could also lead to a negative answer since rivalry between relatives or knowledge of a bad habit of the relative could make them a less desirable spouse. In the case of a *ghareeb*, a stranger, the families must more thoroughly investigate the reputation and background of the candidate and their family, as they are less familiar with one another and have to rely more heavily on the information they can gather on the candidate and their family.

While women play an important role in the first stages of the matchmaking, during the investigation period and afterwards the role of male relatives becomes central. Men negotiate the marriage conditions such as the dower. And after both parties agree, the groom sends an official delegation, mainly formed by (senior) men, to the house of the bride to officially ask for her hand in marriage, after which the families read the *fatiha*. Soon afterward, and particularly among Palestinian residents of Wihdat, the couple will conclude a marriage contract at court—a *kitab*—and plan an engagement party.

## ENGAGEMENTS AND MARRIAGE CONTRACTS

Marriages of residents in Jordan, both those holding Jordanian citizenship and 'foreign' residents, fall under the Personal Status Law (2010). Registration of a marriage is mandatory. The marriage contract should be concluded by a judge or by a person authorized by the court, and fines can be imposed on those involved in the conclusion of a marriage contract that is not officially registered (Personal Status Law 2010: Article 36). The Jordanian Personal Status Law for Muslims starts with articles that discuss the definition of engagements ('the request or promise of marriage', Article 2), and regulations around engagements and breakups (Ibid: Articles 3–4), differentiating an engagement from the conclusion of a marriage contract and the consummation of a marriage. In social practice, however, the definition of what constitutes an engagement or a marriage is more ambiguous. Mir-Husseini (1994) shows that in Muslim-majority countries the validity of a marriage is based on three forms of legitimation: first, it derives its legitimacy from Sharia or sacred law; second, from the modern legal system and state registration; and third, from society—that is, social practices and beliefs. Whereas the conclusion of the contract 'renders the couple *halal* (licit) to each other', it does not 'establish the conjugal unit' (Mir-Husseini 1994: 68). It is the wedding celebration that marks the social recognition of a marriage. Marriages of which the legitimacy is unquestioned fulfil all three requirements; for the majority of marriages this is indeed the case.



The complexity of what constitutes a marriage, and at which moment, emerged in discussions in Wihdat.<sup>27</sup> Palestinian residents usually considered the conclusion and registration of the marriage contract the start of the engagement period. The couple does not consider themselves to be married but will say that they are engaged 'with *kitab*.' Wihdat residents told me that concluding the contract *badri*, early in a relationship, is a local custom. They explained that often the family of the bride insisted on concluding it as soon as possible so that the groom could visit her and the family more comfortably, without having to worry about the neighbours' gossip. Concluding the contract allows them to meet each other, sit together, and talk with each other on the phone. In addition, it allows the woman—who usually wears a headscarf—to appear in front of her fiancé with uncovered hair.

Explaining this practice as a custom or tradition (*'adat*, *'awayed*, or *taqaleed*), Palestinian Wihdat residents argued that it is specific to them as a conservative community (*moḥafeẓ*). In Wihdat, women's mobility is controlled and gender-mixing is socially limited and regulated. Concluding the contract allows a man and a woman who have no familial ties to spend time together in a socially acceptable manner.<sup>28</sup> Residents often contrasted this with West Amman, perceived to be more upper-middle class and 'Westernized'. There, I was told, people often concluded the contract at a later stage, usually only days before the wedding celebration, because the bride and groom are allowed to go out together and visit each other without having concluded the contract.

In addition to locating Wihdat in East Amman, sharing specific practices with the surrounding 'more conservative' neighbourhoods, residents also referred to the influence of the specificities and social organization of the camp. Some of my interlocutors criticized Palestinians who moved out of the camp to West Amman and changed their 'customs,' while others simply recognized the difference between living inside and outside of the camp. One Wihdat mother told me that her relatives who moved to West Amman were less conservative and let their daughters move more freely, because there the neighbours were less involved with each other's lives and people enjoyed more privacy. In the camp, however, controlling women's mobility was very important for families to maintain their good repu-

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27 See Hughes (2015) for a discussion on the historical development of oral and court-issued marriage contracts in Jordan.

28 When the groom and bride are close relatives (such as first cousins), it is more acceptable to delay the conclusion of the contract. People are assumed to talk less when a man visits his relatives' house, even if he is engaged to someone who lives there. In addition, the families will be more familiar with each other, implying more trust, and thus less need to conclude an early *kitab*.



tation, especially since with people living in close proximity to each other, every move could be noticed by neighbours.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Wihdat residents argued that the early conclusion of the contract provided a space for couples to get acquainted during the engagement period, in everyday life attitudes were more ambiguous. Firstly, the majority of my interlocutors explained that when engaged couples concluded a contract, they usually did not get the opportunity to go out together or to meet without company or supervision. As Zeina, a mother of three daughters, explained, she was against the 'early *kitab*,' because even though Islamically and legally the couple is married, the families will still not allow them to spend time alone together. Many women whom I interviewed confirmed this. Their criticism was not so much directed at the early conclusion of the contract—a practice that was important to their Eastern Amman camp identity—but rather at the high level of surveillance, and the fact that the space for young couples to meet regularly and get to know each other before the wedding was very limited.

A second point of criticism was the negative consequences of a breakup for an engaged couple who had concluded the contract. The Personal Status Law and the Shari'a courts recognize the difference between a divorce before and after the consummation of a marriage, and they are regulated by different provisions. When the engagement 'with *kitab*' has been broken, the breakup will be registered at the court as a 'divorce before consummation.' In that case, the bride is entitled to only half of the dower instead of the whole amount agreed upon (Personal Status Law 2010: Article 45).<sup>30</sup> It is also easier for a woman to ask for a divorce at court without the agreement of the husband (*tafriq al-iftida'*) if the marriage has not yet been consummated (Ibid: Article 114). Socially, however, a divorce before consummation often carries with it a negative stigma, especially for the woman concerned, who also in that case is labelled as 'divorcée.' Whereas the breakup may have financial consequences for the groom, my interviews indicated that the men seemed to manage getting out of the payment, either due to the fact that the woman herself asked for the divorce and as a consequence gave up her entitle-

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29 Interestingly enough, those conversations hardly touched on socioeconomic differences between East and West Amman. Of course, the division of Amman is not so clear cut. But when Wihdat residents referred to the 'less conservative' parts of Amman, and to Palestinians who left the camp to live there (and not in other neighborhoods in East Amman, which is common as well), the implicit difference was often socioeconomic.

30 Article 45 of the Personal Status Law mentions the payment of half a dower in a separation before consummation or before valid seclusion. This separation can be the result of a *ṭalaq*, when a husband unilaterally divorces/repudiates his wife, in addition to other ways in which a marriage can be dissolved.

ments, or because the man could prove that she was at fault and he had a good reason for breaking up (in accordance with Article 47 of the Personal Status Law).

Even though Palestinian Wihdat residents regretted that the conclusion of a contract does not allow couples enough space to get to know each other well before the marriage, and worried about the negative consequences of a breakup, they considered the practice important to their East Amman camp identity. This widespread practice among Palestinians, and Wihdat's specific normative landscape, was experienced differently by Syrian residents of the camp. Syrian interlocutors often contrasted Wihdat's gender segregation and normative behaviour to what they were used to in Syria. Imm Rasem, a Syrian widow from Daraa whose oldest son was sixteen years old at the time, complained to me that her Palestinian neighbours did not visit her at home because they say she has a 'man' in the house. 'What man?!' she proclaimed, 'he hardly leaves his room. He will be too shy to come out anyway if I have visitors.' Yasmeen, another Syrian woman from Damascus, asked me during our interview if I minded her husband joining us. She knew that most Palestinians preferred not to have a man join women in the room, while back in Syria it was acceptable for men and women to sit together when there were visitors. She later complained to me how she had to adapt to acceptable forms of behaviour in the market of Wihdat. In Damascus, Yasmeen said, a woman could argue with a vendor and chat and bargain with a smile on her face. Here, however, if a woman smiles to a vendor, he will think she is flirting. After several unpleasant incidents, she learned not to smile again when shopping and to only engage in brief bargaining conversations.

The differences between Syrian and Palestinian Wihdat residents regarding normative social behaviour can partly be explained by the socioeconomic background of the residents. Syrians in Wihdat come from different areas of Syria and are varied in their socioeconomic backgrounds, as some used to live in big cities, while others came from rural areas; each had their own social practices related to gender comportment and expectations. Palestinians, however, were more homogeneous in their socioeconomic background, as those that had the (economic and social) means to leave the camp did so. The specific normative gender behaviour of the camp was shared by most Palestinian Wihdat residents and was something many Syrians had to adapt to, including those that considered themselves just as conservative as their Palestinian neighbours.<sup>31</sup>

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31 Syrian interlocutors' use of the word conservative usually referred to their religious practices and level of religiosity, in addition to being socially conservative—putting importance on specific comportment and way of dress. Especially Syrian rural residents often stressed to me that they felt comfortable in Wihdat because they came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds and

The social organization of the camp not only prompted Syrians to adapt to the general social behaviour expected in Wihdat, but it also impacted their marriage practices. This was especially the case in relation to the engagement period and the conclusion of the marriage contract. The crucial role of female relatives in having access to bride candidates and initiating a marriage match was shared by both Syrian and Palestinian residents. The main divergence was in their views on what makes a marriage legitimate.

In Syria, many Syrians concluded the Islamic requirements of a marriage without registering it with the state, terming it a *zawaj barrani*, an outside marriage, or *zawaj sheikh*, a sheikh marriage. Even though registration of a marriage was required by law, and all involved in contracting the marriage outside of the official channels were liable to penal sanctions, in practice, the offending couple was usually asked to pay a small fine, which did not seem to discourage the practice, as evidenced by the high prevalence of unregistered marriages (Van Eijk 2013). Many people decided to register their marriages only 'when there was a legal reason to do so, for instance when children were born from these marriages' (168). After their arrival in Jordan, Syrians I spoke to became aware of the legal requirement to register a marriage in Jordan, but often faced obstacles in doing so. Lack of the necessary official documents, costs for court and transportation, or one or more parties having a lower marriage age than approved by the Jordanian court, all hindered or delayed official marriage registration.

Syrians were aware of the negative view Palestinians had regarding marriages that were not officially concluded through the court. Both Palestinians and Jordanians often described unregistered marriages as '*urfi*', which may refer to customary marriages that conform to Islamic law, but also to more controversial forms of marriages that do not necessarily meet all Islamic requirements. Before the emergence of the modern nation-state, unregistered ('*urfi*'), but publicly celebrated marriages were the norm (Moors 2013). Contemporary '*urfi*' marriages, by contrast, are often concealed from particular categories of people, such as state authorities, parents, or the husband's first wife and her family. The least controversial '*urfi*' marriages are those that are widely publicized in the community but not registered with the state (Moors 2013; Abaza 2001; Van Eijk 2013; Sonneveld 2009: 53). In my conversation with Imm Rasem, she explained:

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shared Wihdat residents' more conservative social attitudes. What they found difficult to adapt to however was the lack of open space and the fact that most Palestinian families in Wihdat lived in small and closed apartments where men and women hardly mingled.

To you Palestinians, you consider it *'urfi*. For us, it is the opposite. They get out in front of the people, they have read the *fatiha*, in presence of the sheikh. Later they register their marriage at court. Not right away. This is our custom like that. But you consider it *'urfi*. We don't. There are witnesses, her family, her siblings, and there is a sheikh, according to Allah and his prophet's Sunna.

As Imm Rasem explained, a marriage that is not state-registered nevertheless fulfils the Islamic requirements and is not done in secret but in front of people at a public wedding ceremony. She wanted to make it very clear that this was different from what Jordanians meant when they used the term *'urfi* marriage; that is, a marriage purposefully concealed. If we return to Mir-Husseini's (1994) work on the validity of Islamic marriages, to Imm Rasem a marriage derives its legitimacy from Islamic law, as it is concluded through a sheikh and meets the Islamic requirements of a marriage, and from social practices. This is how Syrians do it—their 'custom,' as Imm Rasem said. The modern legal system itself did not affect the legitimacy of a marriage in her eyes. Yet it was precisely this legal construct that to Palestinians, and to the wider Jordanian society and legal system, was very important, as the lack of legal legitimacy affected the social legitimacy of a marriage.

## MARRIAGES AND THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

The previous section demonstrated how the normative landscape and Wihdat's infrastructure impacted the way couples met, and the steps taken towards the conclusion of a marriage contract. Marriage practices are not only located in a specific place, but also in a specific historical moment. With political and historic changes, marriage practices and discourses shift and change.

Palestinians have been exiled from their homeland for over seventy years, and much literature investigates how specific historic and political events have impacted the social lives and practices of Palestinian refugees (Latte-Abdallah 2009; Johnson et. al. 2009; Meier 2010; Shehada 2008; Sayigh 2013). One such work is the generational study of Latte-Abdallah in her research about Palestinian refugee women in Jordan (2009). Based on research in Jabal Hussein camp in Amman and the Gaza camp in Jerash, north of Amman, Latte-Abdallah discusses marriage practices among four generations of Palestinian women. She discovered that for the 'Palestine generation,' who got married before the 1948 War, familial and communal ties overrode conjugal bonds, and most marriage partners were chosen by the family. This did not change much for the second generation, the

'daughters of the Nakba,' who grew up in refugee camps in exile. The fact that families were now refugees, however, meant an increase in poverty, and for peasant families who lost their land it also meant the confinement of women to the house.

Women born between 1954 and 1968 were of 'a generation of political hope and activist momentum, infused with optimism and a sense of possibility' (Latte-Abdallah 2009: 53). Education became more widespread, and many young Palestinians became active in the Palestinian national movement, or moved to work in the Gulf countries, which contributed to an economic boom. This was when 'love between husband and wife was represented as a social value, a desired (and sometimes lived) feeling' (Ibid). This changed for the next generation, with Palestinian political fragmentation, Jordan's monitoring of political activities, the rise in popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood in the camps (Ibid: 55), and economic decline following the Gulf War. As Abdullah states, 'personal ambitions for this generation have been limited by the scarcity of professional and marriage opportunities' (Ibid: 58), and reliance on community and 'conservative family values' increased (Ibid: 55).

Johnson et. al. similarly argue for the importance of research on marriage to 'engage with the wider influences of "the times"' (2009: 16), and with the impact of political upheaval and activism on marriages. In Wihdat, I indeed found that the role of politics in marriages differed from one generation to another. Marriages of couples that belong to the same political faction, or who both consider political activism important—what Johnson et. al. refer to as 'political marriages'—were more salient in the 1970s and 1980s. Interviewees who grew up during the decades of martial law (1967-1989) and were politically active in their youth, told me how they had desired to marry comrades, someone with whom they could share their passion for politics. In these instances, political affiliation became a basis for familiarity and closeness, as was the case with Palestinians active in the first Intifada in Palestine, as discussed by Johnson et. al. (2009: 15).

Political activism still played an important role in the identification of current-day Wihdat as a Palestinian place. Nevertheless, since the crackdown on Palestinian activism by Jordanian authorities in the 1970s and the illegalization of Palestinian political movements, there were fewer official channels available for Palestinian political activities. Local organizations and centres organized events to commemorate important Palestinian days and to celebrate a shared Palestinian heritage, and some key figures in the camp openly defied Jordanian authorities and called for active involvement in the 'Palestinian cause.' However, the major-

ity of my interlocutors were not directly involved in politics.<sup>32</sup> With the general decrease of political activism in Wihdat and with it the importance of political affiliation, its importance in marriage decisions also seems to be limited. As Latte-Abdallah concluded for the fourth generation in her discussion, economic and daily hardships combined with a somewhat repressive political climate seem to accentuate reliance on community and conservative values, which is reflected in marriage decisions and practices.

Syrian residents have a shorter history as displaced communities in Jordan. The large majority are first generation refugees still in the process of adapting to the social and political climate of the country, and are dealing with the direct consequences of war and displacement. All of my interlocutors grew up in Syria and have fresh memories of their homes and cities. They still had family members living there and were dealing with traumatic experiences of war and loss. While Palestinians have a longer history in Jordan and form a nation in exile as a result of a protracted conflict, this research locates current marriage practices and discourses among Syrians in a specific time period as well: in the first years following displacement, while war is still actively being waged in their homeland.<sup>33</sup>

## Marriages of love, tradition, and understanding

Zuheir, an unmarried man in his late thirties, was ready to get married. His mother had passed away, so his sisters and aunts took the responsibility of searching for a bride for him. Zuheir trusted his female relatives to find him a suitable wife. I asked him whether he was concerned that he would not get the chance to know the bride well enough by finding her through relatives. He answered that before an official match, he will sit with the woman once or twice, as 'people can know in one week. They can know the mentality of the woman, the way she thinks, her empathy.' He stated that an engagement period of two months would be enough

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32 During the Arab Spring protests that erupted in 2011-2012, some youth were mobilized from and around Wihdat, but after a few arrests and concessions by the King, these protests died down. Most Wihdat residents politically active in Wihdat are members of Jordanian political movements which have their roots in abolished Palestinian movements.

33 Chapter Five will focus specifically on marriages among Syrians as a practice located in this time period during the initial years of displacement.

for him, saying that 'some people prefer an engagement period of two years, but that only happens if the couple is young.'

Omar, in his mid-twenties, had a very different opinion on the acquaintance time and space needed for a successful match. He wanted to be in a relationship with a woman before getting engaged to her. He explained:

You cannot know from only sitting with her once. During the engagement period the girl is an angel, and so is the guy. Who knows what happens after this period? The engagement period is nonsense, it is fake. Both want to show themselves at their best. If you have a relationship beforehand, you get to know her better, how she thinks and what she thinks. If she gets angry, you learn how to calm her. You learn what upsets her, and she learns what upsets you.

Wihdat residents referred to the matchmaking process of Rahaf and Karim, and of Zuheir's preferred match, as a traditional match, *zawaj taqlidi*. Specific to such matches is that the couple does not intimately know each other in advance and the marriage match is initiated by relatives. Interlocutors debated the desirability of such traditional matches and that of other matches, such as those based on romantic love, *zawaj 'an hub*. Categorizing marriages as traditionally arranged matches or love-marriages mirrors terminology used, and criticized, by various scholars. By unpacking the terminology used in literature and in the local context of Wihdat, in what follows I show that love and arranged marriages are not necessarily two opposing types. Wihdat residents defined a marriage as traditional largely based on the extent to which the couple knew each other before an official marriage proposal. Moreover, Wihdat residents considered the most important ingredient of a successful marriage to be the existence of mutual understanding—*tafahom*—between the couple, which could be present in both a marriage based on a preceding romantic relationship or in a traditional match.

## LOVE AND TRADITION IN LITERATURE

In her argument against the dichotomy of 'arranged' versus 'love' marriages, Osella criticizes the work of Giddens in which he contrasts marriages based on sacrifice and compromise to marriages based on 'pure love' (2012: 242). Based on her ethnographic research in South Asia she shows that 'the contemporary situation is not ushering in so much a clear transition from one form to another, but an altogether more ambivalent and hybrid picture' (Ibid: 243). Whereas Osella rec-

ognizes that marriage relations and kinship are being reshaped under what she terms conditions of *embourgeoisement*, she nevertheless notes that ‘all marriages across all social classes involve a mix of practical-pragmatic, economic and affectual-passionate considerations and forces’ (Ibid: 244). Allouche promotes a similar argument on love in Lebanon, showing the enmeshment of social, material and affective dimensions of love (2019: 161). She argues that, instead of viewing larger kin networks as an ‘obstacle to “true love”’ (Ibid.), kinship relations are integral and conducive of romantic relations as couples actively incorporate ‘proximate others (imminent kin and friends) ... thus stretching the boundaries of the couple space’ (Ibid: 162).

In her study on marriages in a Turkish village, Hart similarly complicates the assumption of a linear development from tradition and kinship to modernity and individuality, in which romantic love is a modern concept (2007). She found that villagers imagined love as a particularly ‘modern’ concept (Ibid: 350), and parents claiming to be modern insisted that their children should find their future spouses on their own. However, ‘the line between arranged marriage and love-match seems to be increasingly blurry’ (Ibid: 354) as couples involved in a relationship created an appearance of an arranged marriage through performing specific marriage rituals, while couples in an arranged match developed romantic relationships in their engagement period or afterward. Moreover, Hart argues that the concept of love is multi-layered and brings together sexual, spiritual and romantic notions that have a longstanding presence in Turkish villages (Ibid: 352-353).

Other scholars have contributed to this literature by showing love and arranged marriages as two hybrid and complex types on a continuum rather than two opposed categories (Kreil 2016: 138; Marsden 2007: 99). Marsden further complicates the notion of what anthropologists have identified as ‘individuated love interests as a novel product of globalizing modernity’ by showing how love in Pakistan is often rooted in a long-standing Chitrali poetic genre (2007: 104).

This critical literature pushes researchers to question often-used dichotomies of tradition versus modernity, arranged versus love, and prioritizing kin networks versus prioritizing individual choice. This literature however still revolves around traditionally arranged marriages and romantic love as the identifying markers, albeit in hybrid and complex forms. I argue that rather than considering arranged and love marriages as two extremes on a continuum, they are two of many elements that might, and might not, be important to the people involved in marriage practices.



## LOCAL CONCEPTIONS OF LOVE AND TRADITION

Wihdat residents' discourses show the ambiguous, complicated and sometimes contradictory attitudes towards what they term traditional marriages. According to them, what made a marriage traditional was that family members were involved in introducing a couple who had no prior knowledge of each other before the match. As such, the opposite of a traditional marriage was not necessarily a marriage based on love, but a match in which the couple knew each other in advance and initiated the marriage arrangement.<sup>34</sup> To what extent the couple knew each other before, and what extent was desirable, differed from case to case.

As discussed in the previous section, one of the main concerns of Palestinian Wihdat residents in concluding the marriage contract at the start of an engagement period was that a couple might not have the chance to get to know each other well enough before the wedding. Male and female interlocutors complained that their spouses turned out to be different than what they had imagined beforehand, because of the lack of space and opportunity during the engagement to get acquainted. As such, the objection was not necessarily against the arrangement of a marriage in the 'traditional' way, in the sense that they did not know the person well in advance, but that the formal process of engagement left little space to get to know each other. This space was not only material, as it was difficult for a couple to find a location for them to be alone or walk around together in Wihdat, but also social, because of the specific normative gender comportment expected in the camp.

Some Wihdat residents attempted to increase that space. Zayd, a young Wihdat man studying at college, insisted that he would try to find his bride himself instead of relying on his mother. He further explained that if he saw a nice woman, he would not approach her directly but ask about her, and afterward send his mother to ask for her hand in marriage. Zayd did not define this as a traditional marriage as he would have chosen the bride himself. He believed that he would find a better match for himself than his mother could—but if he had no luck on his own, he might still ask for his mother's help.<sup>35</sup>

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34 The same applies to cousins or relatives that marry each other. If they have already developed an interest in each other and asked their parents to arrange a marriage, they differed from cases where a woman might have hardly interacted with her cousin until the day his mother asks for her hand in marriage.

35 Such a marriage proposal, where a man chooses the bride himself, might not be considered a traditional match to him, but it could still be experienced as such by the bride. She will learn of the interest of the man initially through his mother who will visit her at home. Other cases in which a couple experiences the match differently is when a man has been in love with a woman

Zayd's hypothetical way of finding a future spouse would not allow him to get to intimately know the woman before involving the families. He insisted that he would learn enough about her character and morals from the way she dressed, the friends she associated with, and by asking about her before sending his mother to her family. He would still only talk to her and meet her after an official engagement. For him, to know a woman in advance meant something different than for other critics of traditional matches, who insisted on the necessity of either personal knowledge of each other or a romantic relationship to be the basis of a marriage.

Narmeen, a twenty-eight-year-old unmarried woman, repeatedly insisted that she was against a traditional marriage. She did not necessarily wish to fall in love with a man before an engagement, but wanted a man to approach her himself first, before sending his mother to her family. She hoped to meet someone through her work as a schoolteacher, or during the many organizations and community activities in Wihdat in which she was involved. One day she had met a storeowner at the Wihdat market and was very excited, hoping this might lead to real interest on the man's part in a marriage. She often passed by his store to chat and buy clothes for her young nephews. She eventually got disappointed when it became clear that he was not interested in her in that way. Meanwhile, another man's mother had visited her at her family's house and asked for a second visit to come with her son. Narmeen did not want the second visit to take place as she was not convinced by what she heard about him that he was a good match for her. Moreover, she insisted that she did not want a traditional marriage. She was facing some pressure from her mother and sisters to at least meet the man and decide later, but she stood by her decision.

Yet, men and women were able to meet in socially conservative Wihdat. They could meet and talk at places of work, the market, and at local centres.<sup>36</sup> If a couple met in Wihdat and decided to pursue a relationship, or at least get together with-

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(in the cases I encountered it was often a cousin) for a long time without her knowing, and at some point sends his mother to ask for her hand. The woman in this case would still define her marriage as a traditional one.

36 Other places where men and women could meet included the streets and private houses. One interlocutor met her husband as he walked to the mosque every day passing her on her balcony. After a month of passing by, he decided to throw her a piece of paper with his phone number and they started talking on the phone. Some interlocutors were in a relationship with a relative they met during family visits. Women's and men's access to mobile phones definitely increased the available space to pursue a relationship outside of families' purview. However, even then, some female interlocutors had to hide their phones from their family and could only talk on the phone when outside of the house or at night when everyone was asleep, for fear of being caught.

out the families' knowledge, they would agree to meet outside of Wihdat, where there was less social control and risk involved. Some interlocutors met in cafes in other parts of Amman, or just walked together accompanied by friends in market streets. However, as it was especially difficult for young unmarried women to find a good excuse to leave the house unaccompanied, most couples in a relationship were not able to meet very often.

One of the available places outside of the social gaze of Wihdat where meetings and relationships could occur was university or college. Wihdat residents that followed higher education had that physical space outside of Wihdat, and a good reason to be there unaccompanied by relatives. Couples could spend time together and get to know each other without any family interference. This was the case for Hanan, who was studying at a local college when a cousin of hers introduced her to an acquaintance, a man from outside of Wihdat. They were in a relationship for two years during which he visited her at college, they went out together several times, and often talked on the phone. At some point he sent his sisters to officially ask for her hand in marriage. During the marriage negotiations, Hanan told her mother and a handful of female friends that she already knew him. They kept it a secret from her father and to most other relatives. They were afraid the father would object to the match if he knew there was contact between them already, indicating the groom's 'bad character.' When I asked Hanan the ingredients of a good marriage, she listed honesty, love, and patience, and stressed that a romantic relationship prior to the wedding did not necessarily make the marriage better. Because it worked out for her did not mean that it was the only way to get married, nor that it worked for everyone.

Wihdat residents often voiced ambivalent and sometimes contradictory opinions regarding marriages. During my time in Wihdat I gave English lessons to a group of women from Wihdat and the neighbouring areas at a local women's centre. We often stayed after class to chat about various subjects, and I was able to ask them about marriage-related topics. The women disagreed as to what extent it was proper for a woman to meet or talk to a man without the families' knowledge. Some argued that they should only talk after an engagement, while others believed it was fine to be involved in a secret relationship. The majority, however, agreed that a marriage based on a preceding romantic relationship did not necessarily lead to a happy marriage. It might lead to divorce just like any other marriage.

At the same time as insisting on this very possible failure of love, they also romanticized and recounted love stories—a favourite theme at our gatherings. Salam, a thirty-eight-year-old unmarried woman, was trying hard to convince Lena, a twenty-four-year-old unmarried woman, to be open to meeting men 'traditionally' instead of insisting on falling in love in advance. Right after that, she

proceeded to tell us about her brother's years of attempting to marry his cousin, whom he was deeply in love with, against his uncle's wishes. The cousins were in a relationship without the parents' knowledge, and when the father of the woman found out, he objected to the match and apparently locked his daughter up in the house and prevented her from leaving as punishment for their relationship. After many family arguments and interventions, and the payment of a huge amount of *mahr*, the father finally accepted the proposal. Salam ended the story by saying that 'true love conquers all.'

Salam's insistence that her friend should be open to proposals of men she did not know in advance while simultaneously romanticizing the concept of love in her brother's story shows that people did not necessarily believe that one type of marriage was necessarily better than the other. Rather, whether a marriage should be based on a previous romantic relationship or not, depended on the situation of the person and the context. Salam's insistence that Lena should be more open to meeting men 'traditionally' stemmed from the fact that the years were going by without Lena finding a man on her own. By staying open to traditional matches, she had a bigger chance of meeting a good future husband.

The debates and conversations around what makes a marriage successful show the variety of opinions on what contributes to a good match. Concepts of traditional/arranged marriage and love marriage were employed by interlocutors, and thus this terminology cannot be disregarded. However, central to these debates was the question of the extent to which a couple should, and could, get to know each other before a wedding. The extent to which it was arranged by relatives or based on a romantic relationship was often of secondary importance.

## **TAFAHOM: MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING AS THE BASIS OF MARRIAGE**

In addition to debating the desirability and possibility of couples getting acquainted before an official match, another topic that was often mentioned goes beyond an analysis of marriage through the concepts of love and tradition. Many interlocutors insisted that what mattered most in a successful marriage was the presence of *tafahom*, mutual understanding, between the couple. *Tafahom* could stem from a variety of personal, familial or communal characteristics, such as familiarity and similarity in national and cultural background, the character of the (future) spouse, or the couple sharing similar future desires and marriage expectations.

Yara was a divorced twenty-six-year-old hairdresser with three children. She married at the age of fifteen to a man who was sixteen years her senior, and they remained married for eight years. Her husband was a friend of her uncle. She got

engaged to him at the age of fourteen without concluding a *kitab*, as her parents did not want him to come and visit her too often. They married after an eight-month-long engagement period, but she felt she did not really know him. Their problems started one month into their marriage when she found out that he drank a lot of alcohol and repeatedly cheated on her.

The biggest problem in their marriage, according to Yasmeen, was that he was so much older. The age gap was problematic because it led to a lack of mutual understanding:

I was young, and he was much older. This is the biggest problem. There was no *tafahom*. Even if I was young, but took someone who was around my age, we would have understood each other and agreed [*tfahamna wa etafaqna*], and built our lives together. But someone sixteen years older is the biggest problem. He was already full of life and I was still learning about it. If he had been younger, even if there were problems, we would have been in agreement. There was no understanding at all, no affection [*ḥeniyya*]. Other women marry older men and say there is *tafahom*, but I did not see that.

Yasmeen did not think herself to be too young to get married at that age, as she was ready to bear the responsibilities and start a family of her own. Nevertheless, she insisted that she would not want her daughter to marry before the age of twenty. She wanted her daughter to marry someone she loved, so that 'they know each other and care about each other, that there is *tafahom*. I am against traditional marriage, because there needs to be a period to get to know each other [*marḥalet ta'arof*]. Let them be engaged and understand each other.' To Yasmeen, a traditional marriage meant no space for the couple to know each other and develop feelings of love and understanding that could be the basis of a strong marriage. As she argued, the wide age gap combined with the lack of meetings during the engagement period led to an unhappy marriage and an eventual divorce.

Imm Rasha explained *tafahom* differently. To her, it was more about how the couple viewed life and their future together, but also about educational background. A mother of four daughters, Imm Rasha grew up in another East Amman neighbourhood and moved to Wihdat after her marriage. According to her, the environment of the camp was different from what she was used to, and it took her some time to adapt to life in Wihdat. When I asked what in her opinion caused marital problems, she answered: 'that you do not understand him, and he does not understand you. You look forward and he looks backward. When he does not

think of the future, and you always work towards a future, to build something for yourself and the children, to provide them with better chances.'

Basing mutual understanding on a shared worldview stemmed from Imm Rasha's frustrations with her husband. She and her husband lacked mutual understanding because of their different orientation towards life and their future. She explained it differently when she discussed her daughters. Imm Rasha insisted that her daughters continue higher education, and her eldest daughter was already in her second year of university. First studies, then marriage, she insisted for her daughters. She also insisted that she knew best which man would be a good match for her daughter. If her daughter would agree to a match while Imm Rasha was not convinced, she would try to stop it, as 'I know what is right, I see what is right. What my daughter does not see, I see.' Her eldest daughter informed her mother whenever she met a man interested in her for marriage. Imm Rasha was against her daughter going out with a man, but she had no objections if a man showed interest in her and came for an official visit. When I asked what she would look for in a possible match for her daughter, she answered, 'first his faith, then his education. That he understands her and knows what she wants. Not all girls are the same, and some only care about material stuff, but each girl has her way of thinking, and I know how my daughter thinks. If they both went to university and are understanding of each other [*metfahmeen*], that is best.' Mutual understanding in the case of Imm Rasha's daughters was mainly embodied in similar levels of education. Faith, degree of religiosity, and good behaviour were also very important—but it was the future spouse's level of education that would most contribute to mutual understanding between him and her educated daughter.

The way Wihdat residents employed the concept of mutual understanding came close to the concept of compatibility [*insijam*] Adely introduces in her research on love and marriage among Amman residents (2016). Her interviewees were university educated upper and lower middle-class Palestinian and Jordanian residents. They referred to the importance of compatibility as the basis for a marriage and were 'ambivalent about love' and questioned its reliability (Ibid: 103). Adely's interlocutors used the concept of compatibility to refer to notions that to Wihdat residents contributed to *tafahom* and a good marriage: class, similar family background, and 'cultural' background (Ibid: 110) but also more individual characteristics such as 'level of comfort, education, moral standing, [and] degrees of religiosity' (Ibid: 117).<sup>37</sup>

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37 Adely's interviewees also referred to 'chemistry' (2016: 117) as contributing to compatibility, a word I never heard used in Wihdat. Whether one found the other person physically attractive was mentioned by some interlocutors. Others criticized people for considering looks rather than

While there is an overlap between the concepts of compatibility and mutual understanding, there are also divergences. To Adely's interlocutors, compatibility of a couple can be 'an indication of the potential for love in the future' (Ibid: 119). Wihdat interlocutors used different terminology. To them, it was not necessarily love that they mentioned they were aiming for, but mutual understanding between a couple.<sup>38</sup> Affection and love could lead to mutual understanding, and so could a match arranged by relatives in which the couple had no prior knowledge of each other. In addition to looking at the degree to which a specific marriage was based on a romantic concept of love, or on tradition and involvement of kin-networks, Wihdat interlocutors looked at the extent to which they were able to familiarize themselves with their future spouse before the wedding, and whether there was a basis for mutual understanding that could strengthen the marital bond.

Another notable difference with the work of Adely stems from the specific characteristics and background of my interlocutors. Religion and class, two elements that were discussed by Adely's interlocutors as contributing to compatibility, were not often discussed by Wihdat residents. The lack of talking about religious affiliation might stem from it being a self-evident boundary that is hardly transgressed in Wihdat. Inter-faith marriages were neither a topic of debate, nor spoken of as a threat. Residents of Wihdat are quite homogeneous in their religious affiliation (Sunni-Muslims), and rather than religion, it was the degree of religiosity of a person that played an important role in marriage matches. During the first visits of a groom and his family to a prospective bride, and during the investigation period, families asked how often the prospective spouse prayed and whether he or she fasted. The man might ask the woman about her clothing style and whether she was willing to wear a *jilbab*.<sup>39</sup> The woman's brothers often verify the groom's religious commitments at his local mosque. In these discourses, the degree of religiosity indicated the personality of a person, with the assumption that the more religious the person, the more desirable he or she was as a future spouse.<sup>40</sup>

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religiosity and personality and stressed that for them looks and physical attraction were not important.

38 Some women also evoked the concept of *mawadda* as a necessary ingredient of a marriage in addition to mutual understanding. *Mawadda* is best translated as 'affection,' a concept often invoked by Islamist revivalists in their preaching on the importance of companionate marriages (Hughes 2015: 3).

39 A *jilbab* refers to a full-length outer dress that covers the arms.

40 There were also exceptions. One woman refused the marriage proposal of any man who asked her to change her clothing style. She was very much into fashion and was convinced that her future husband should respect her clothing style and allow her to practice her religion the way she saw fit.

Class was referred to in marriage discourses, albeit indirectly. To Palestinian Wihdat residents, their shared lower socioeconomic class was also often self-evident. Being a camp resident of East Amman carried with it the notion of a specific class culture, as they often contrasted themselves and their practices with Palestinians who moved out of the camp and with West-Amman residents. When I asked Rahaf whether she minded marrying someone from the camp, she indicated the importance of Karim and her sharing the same socioeconomic background, saying that Ashrafiyya and Wihdat were very similar. I asked her how the two neighbourhoods were similar, to which she replied: 'in everything.' She considered it a positive thing to marry someone from the same socioeconomic status [*nafs el-tabaqah*], so that 'he does not think he is better than me, and I don't think I am better than him.' It was important to her that he had a stable job, but insisted that she would not have wanted to marry someone with higher levels of education or who possessed a lot of money. The idea of marrying up with a wealthier or better educated partner was not often mentioned by interlocutors. Indeed, upward marriage is not always aspired for, especially among women, as it can increase their dependency on their husbands (Moors 1995: 88). Moreover, a similar class background and having grown up in a similar socioeconomic context are seen to contribute to shared expectations of a marriage and *tafahom* between the future spouses.<sup>41</sup>

As for my Syrian interlocutors, nationality was an overriding element that pushed the importance of class to the background. Most Syrian families that ended up in Wihdat were not upper-class Syrian families. They were those without the means to live in more upper-class areas of Amman. They struggled to pay the monthly rent and find stable jobs. Those who might have brought some savings with them to Jordan had already used them up. As I will discuss in detail below, Syrians in Wihdat mainly aimed for marrying fellow-Syrians. Due of the limited number of available Syrian marriage candidates in Amman, my interlocutors did not mention class as an important characteristic of a future spouse. However, and especially in the case of older bachelors who had gone to university in Syria before the war, the level of education of the family and the future spouse did contribute to the desirability of a match, but they rarely framed it as a difference in class or class culture.<sup>42</sup>

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41 For research in Amman where material aspects play an important role in relationships and marriages see Adely (2016) and Nasser El-Dine (2018).

42 The indirect reference in these cases was more to the rural-urban divide as opposed to purely class.



## Nationality matters: national belonging and citizenship

Dina: Did you insist on marrying a Palestinian-Jordanian or would you have considered marrying others as well?

Rahaf: No, I did not mind. A Jordanian-Jordanian would have been fine too. I had many Jordanians asking for my hand. I did not mind, but my family preferred not to. My brothers did not agree. They decided: no Jordanians.

Dina: Karim has a national identity number, right?

Rahaf: Yes, of course.

Dina: Would you have married a Gazan, without a national number?

Rahaf: That would have been very difficult. Life needs to be lived, and life is already so difficult here in Jordan. I do not need any more difficulties.

Marriage discourses in Wihdat often revolved around one's national belonging and background, but also around one's legal status in Jordan. Whereas the first, national background, often indicated familiarity and sameness, *qaraba*, the latter was stressed in discussions around the practicalities of marriage and the necessity of possessing citizenship in Jordan in order to enjoy a decent life. National background in marriages played a different role for Palestinians and Syrians, as refugees related to their history and positionality in Jordan, but also to their relationship with their homeland, the nature of their displacement, and the conflict that has led to it.

The importance of the national background of a future spouse to Wihdat interlocutors diverges from Adely's findings, where it played a minor role, as her interlocutors 'rarely framed the divergence of backgrounds in terms of national origin, unless this difference was also dovetailed with a gap in class status' (Adely 2016: 111). Interestingly, in Wihdat a person's and family's cultural background was often seen as determined by their national belonging.

Various scholars have demonstrated the importance of marriage in the reproduction of communities and nations, and in the processes of boundary construction (e.g. Hasso 2010; Kholoussy 2003, Connolly 2009). This section suggests additionally that group identities and processes of identification are intimately connected to displacement in complex ways that come to light by contrasting

Syrian and Palestinian marriage discourses. Bauman defines identification as 'a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged' (2001: 121). By investigating which processes of identification Palestinian and Syrian residents of Wihdat engage in when it comes to marriage preferences and practices, I show that identities are dynamic, situational, and relational, and incorporate elements that are both prescribed and acquired (Easthope 2009, Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Palestinians often accentuated their Palestinian-ness and debated the desirability of marrying non-Palestinians because of their perceived different cultural background. They stressed their affinity with Jordanians when discussing Syrian or Egyptian marriage candidates, while stressing Palestinian sub-national identifications such as the town of origin when referring to other Palestinians. Syrians, with a shorter history in Jordan and hoping for a speedy return to a post-war Syria, were also involved in fluid identification processes, but when it came to choosing marriage candidates their priority lay in marriages to fellow Syrians, in order to ensure the return of the family to the homeland. This section shows the intersection of national- and community- belonging with more practical issues such as citizenship and legal status in marriage practices and discourses.

## NATIONAL IDENTIFICATIONS AND *QARABA*

One type of controversial marriage in Wihdat was that of Palestinian women marrying Egyptian men residing in Amman. Palestinian families opposed such marriages for two main reasons. The first has to do with the difficulty of ensuring the groom's good character. Egyptian men came to Jordan for work and often lived in houses with other (single) men. They were understood not to have family or strong social networks in Jordan, making it difficult for brides' families to gather reliable information about the man; for example, whether he already had a family in Egypt, or had a criminal past.<sup>43</sup>

The second reason often invoked by Palestinians was that a different cultural background might cause future marital problems. Families feared that a couple that belonged to different national—and thus cultural—backgrounds would have different expectations from each other and the marriage, leading to an unhappy

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43 As most Egyptian migrants in Jordan were men, it is hard to say whether the objection to a marriage with an Egyptian was necessarily gendered. I came across two marriages of Wihdat men with Egyptian women, and I was unable to learn whether the marriages were subject to opposition from families. Neighbours, however, did point out that they wondered what the women were doing in Jordan before marriage and considered them to an extent mysterious individuals.

marriage or a divorce. As a follow-up question to my interlocutors I often asked whether this same reasoning applied to Jordanians. Their answers revealed that in contrast to Egyptian male migrants in Amman, Jordanians were considered more similar in culture and tradition to Palestinians, and more familiar because of their shared history of living together in Jordan for the last seven decades. It was also not difficult to ask about a marriage candidate's reputation as most lived in neighbouring areas and in proximity to relatives that could vouch for their personality.

Notwithstanding the *qaraba* of Jordanians, Palestinian families nevertheless expressed their lack of enthusiasm for a marriage match between a Palestinian relative and a Jordanian. These objections were not necessarily gendered, as it was extended to both men and women. In my attempt to push for explanations as to why, answers varied. Some stated that there was animosity between the two groups and that Jordanians discriminate against Palestinians and blame them for any social and political problems. Others used more specific arguments, such as saying that Jordanian women could not cook, that Jordanian families asked for a very high *mahr*, or arguing that Jordanian men were unkind and harsh to their wives.

To many interlocutors being Palestinian or Jordanian were not necessarily two exclusive identities. As the majority had Jordanian citizenship, they would identify simultaneously as Jordanian and Palestinian. Those that lacked Jordanian citizenship papers also often stressed that they grew up in Jordan and felt proud of their Jordanian-ness.<sup>44</sup> At times, however, and especially in marriage discourses (and in political arguments), identification with one against the other became more salient. Interlocutors would stress different opinions depending on their personal and familial experience in Jordan, and the way they perceived the political and historical relations between Jordan and the Palestinians. Mohammad, a socially active camp resident and unmarried man in his late twenties, argued that for a Palestinian woman to marry from any other nationality was not a problem, but it was problematic if he were Jordanian, as 'that would be unfair to the wife. How they look at us. They will keep referring to her children as the children of the Palestinian.' Mohammad was sure that any Palestinian woman marrying a Jordanian man would face many difficulties as she would not be accepted as an equal by

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44 Perez' research on identification processes among Palestinian refugees in Jordan also shows how Palestinians identified as both Jordanian and Palestinian. He argues that whereas Palestinians stressed their Palestinian ethno-national identification, their identification as Jordanian was mainly in terms of citizenship status. They also expressed affiliation with the Jordanian nation, stressing a shared religious and linguistic background (2001). In my research, some interlocutors made the explicit distinction between citizenship and national belonging, while others did not.

her family-in-law. Omar on the other hand, said that Palestinians and Jordanians were like one people, 'East Bankers and West Bankers don't exist anymore, we are one.' Whereas Mohammad foregrounded the discrimination Palestinians face and the antagonisms between the two groups, Omar considered the shared history and closeness more important.

Syrian families also considered marrying non-Syrians undesirable, but not because of a fear of irreconcilable cultural differences or historic and political animosities. The difference in culture, although often mentioned, was hardly ever explained by Syrians as a reason to object to a Syrian-Palestinian marriage. Rather, Syrian families preferred both their daughters and their sons to marry fellow Syrians to ensure the return of the whole family to Syria once the war was over.<sup>45</sup> National belonging in the case of Syrians thus mattered more for practical reasons, as discussed in the next section.

Beyond national belonging, other points of reference such as villages and towns of origin were also important to Wihdat residents. There was a difference between my Palestinian and Syrian interlocutors, however, when it came to considering marriage partners. When Syrian interlocutors met a new Syrian person who had moved to Wihdat, one of the first questions they were asked was where in Syria they were from. Syrians in Wihdat came from different areas and had diverse backgrounds, as they were unable to socially organize according to the town of origin due to their reliance on the availability of apartments for rent and aid provisions.<sup>46</sup> In marriage pursuits, however, the importance of these differences disappeared as the main focus lay on the (future) spouse being Syrian, regardless of which town they came from. This was different for Palestinians, where the town of origin played an important role in defining the *qaraba* of fellow Palestinians. Since the first years of exile, Palestinians that arrived in Wihdat tried to group together according to their town of origin. Residents set up local centres for each town or family, and often preferred their children to marry someone from the same Palestinian town.<sup>47</sup> Over time, as families moved in and out of Wihdat and

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45 The persistence on marrying a Syrian partner especially applied to women, as women tend to move to their husband's place of residence. However, Syrian parents insisted that they also had that preference for their sons in order to avoid any family tensions and future arguments about returning to Syria.

46 In contrast to the Syrian refugee camps where Syrians tried to group together and live in proximity to other residents from the same areas.

47 This was especially true in the earlier years of exile. As Latte-Abdallah shows, for the first generation of Palestinians who grew up in the camp, marriage practices often reproduced pre-1948 practices (2009: 52).

the residential character of Wihdat changed, the importance of the original town might have decreased, but definitely has not disappeared.

Hanan, mentioned earlier, was a third-generation refugee from the Palestinian town of Al-Haditha (Ramla district), and her husband's family is originally from Al-Dawayima (Hebron District). She said that she never expected herself to marry a *ghareeb*, a stranger. I was surprised that she called her husband *ghareeb*, as he was a Palestinian-Jordanian just like her, and they had been in a two-year relationship before their marriage. Then Hanan explained that Dawayima people were different from Haditha people. According to her, they were more socially conservative and closed off. She knew most Haditha families in the area because her family always kept in close contact with them, but the Dawayima people and their cultural practices were unfamiliar to her. Hanan's understanding of the town of origin as a sign of familiarity echoes other interlocutors who assigned specific characteristics to communities from a specific town.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the town of origin, another point of reference was that of contrasting rural to urban origin. These identifications similarly seemed to be more salient in discourses among Palestinians than among Syrians. For both, these references were used to connote a common heritage and a sense of *qaraba*, rather than defining strict group boundaries. Syrians referred to themselves and others as *rifi* (rural) or *madani* (urban), to explain different social and cultural practices. My Syrian interlocutors agreed that men and women married at a younger age in rural areas because men (and women) often quit school to work the land. Men were able to own a house and start a household at a younger age because they started working earlier. In Damascus and other urban areas, I was told, men and women usually finished high school and continued higher education, and thus needed more time to be ready for marriage. In displacement, however, Syrians in and around Wihdat found themselves in similar socioeconomic conditions. Finding a job, or continuing higher education, was difficult for the majority of Syrians, regardless of the rural-urban divide. Thus, the urban and rural background of a marriage candidate was not a topic of debate.<sup>49</sup>

Palestinians frequently invoked the categories of being a *falah* (peasant), Bedouin, or *madani* (city resident). These identifications did not refer to their cur-

48 See Khalili (2004) for more regarding the importance of the original village in commemorative practices among Palestinian refugees, which has increased in the post-Oslo period.

49 Exceptions were some Syrian single men and women who were enrolled at university in Syria before displacement and insisted on finding a spouse with a similar level of education, indirectly preferring a partner with an urban background. For the majority, however, the stress laid on the future partner being Syrian, period.

rent background, as technically all Wihdat residents were simultaneously urban (residents of Amman) and camp residents. It referred to their families' Palestinian heritage: whether they originally came from a Palestinian peasant village, from a big Palestinian city, or belonged to a Bedouin tribe. There was no tension between simultaneously self-identifying as Jordanian, Palestinian, and a *falah* for example. Rather, these sub-identifications often functioned as a cultural reference to explain differences in customs and practices among Palestinians. In a conversation with two young university students, Ahmad and Muhannad, the importance of these internal categorizations in discourse came to light. Ahmad's family is originally from the peasant village of Kofr 'Ana (Jerusalem district), while Muhannad's family is Bedouin from Ber el Sabe'. Throughout the conversation, the two young men often referred to the ways of the *Sab'awiyyah* and the ways of the *falaheen*. Both of them agreed that when it came to the wedding ceremony, the *Sab'awiyya* were very similar to trans-Jordanians, who are also Bedouin tribes. They both serve *mansaf*, a famous dish of meat and rice, during the wedding, and set up a tent outside of the house in which the wedding takes place.

The identification processes of Syrians and Palestinians reveal several interesting divergences. They point to their specific displacement history and their positionality in Jordan. Through discursive practices, Palestinians perform their Palestinian-ness, and reproduce internal Palestinian identifications. Palestinians engage in fragmented and multiple processes of identification, bringing the different aspects of their background and lived experience together in their discourses. National background, standing in for cultural background, often made marriages with Egyptians and Syrians undesirable. In these discussions, the stress lay on the similarities between Palestinians and Jordanians, often collapsed into one identity, Palestinian-Jordanian. At different times and to different people the categories became antagonistic again and Palestinian-ness was stressed in opposition to Jordanian-ness. Syrians, on the other hand, with a shorter history in Jordan and with different future prospects, invoked the broader national category of being Syrian as the most crucial in marriages, mainly as a way to ensure a return to Syria. As Syrians were more dispersed around Jordan and were in smaller numbers in Wihdat, they often felt affinity and *qaraba* with any Syrian in Jordan, regardless of other identifications.

The identity of Syrians as Syrians was never doubted or contested. In Jordan, they were a more clearly delineated national group than the Palestinians, and the war waging in Syria did not revolve around questions of indigeneity or belonging to the land of Syria. Palestinians on the other hand often found it necessary, beyond marriage discourses, to stress their contested Palestinian-ness. Not only in Jordan, but also on a more global scale. Reaffirming Palestinian national identity is

connected to the continued attempts to erase the plight of Palestinian refugees by Israel, and by the never-ending peace negotiations. Stressing the Palestinian-ness of refugees in Jordan should be considered in light of this wider geopolitical context as well.

Lastly, both the identification processes of Syrians and Palestinians show that identities are as much connected to the present and future, as they are to the past. While memories and connections to an ancestral homeland play an important role, so does the envisioned future. As Palestinians claim a connection to the land of Palestine—to which a return in the near future seems unlikely to materialize—they reaffirm their continuous connection to their homeland, while simultaneously affirming their relation to Jordan and the future they aspire to in the Kingdom. On the other hand, Syrian families considered their displacement a temporary predicament of a still-waging war, leading them to envision an imminent return. This envisioned future highlighted the importance of Syrian-ness in their marriage pursuits.

## LEGAL STATUS AND THE PRACTICALITIES OF MARRIAGE

Abu Ayman had six daughters and two sons. What mattered to him most when it came to his daughters' marriage was that they all marry someone with a *raqam watani*, a national identity number. Abu Ayman and his wife, Imm Ayman, were referred to colloquially as Gazans, Palestinian residents of Jordan who, unlike most Palestinians in the Kingdom, lack citizenship and are considered foreign residents. They were doubly displaced, first to Gaza in 1948, and after the 1967 War to Jordan.<sup>50</sup> Most relatives of Abu Ayman, originally from Yaffa, ended up in Jordan after the 1948 War, except for his father who went to the Gaza Strip. After the 1967 War, he first went to Egypt where he fathered Abu Ayman before joining his relatives in Wihdat.

Abu Ayman grew up with his mother in Cairo, and at age twenty decided to visit his father and give living in Jordan a try. About three years later, while working on a construction site in Wihdat, he saw Imm Ayman and asked for her hand in marriage. Imm Ayman's family were Gazan too. Originally from the South of Palestine, they came to Jordan through Gaza, and similarly lacked Jordanian citizenship. I asked Imm Ayman whether her family did not insist on her marrying someone who had a national identity number. She responded that in those days, the early 1990s, it was more important to marry someone from the same Pales-

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50 Some families first went to Iraq or the Gulf countries after the 1967 War and later joined relatives in Jordan.

tinian background. She recounted a proverb used at the time, '*yokolha temsaḥ wala yokhodha fallah*,' expressing the preference for a woman to be eaten by a crocodile rather than to be married to a peasant (both Imm and Abu Ayman are considered *madaniyeen*, city people). As parents themselves today, they considered that having a legal status in Jordan that grants full civil and political rights more important than the Palestinian background or origin of a groom.

For women lacking citizenship, marrying someone in possession of it solves one of their major concerns: having children who lack citizenship. As foreign residents, they would not only have to be enrolled in private schools and go to private clinics,<sup>51</sup> but would face numerous other obstacles such as in ownership rights and professional careers. Imm and Abu Ayman could solve their daughters' precarious legal status and that of their future children, by insisting on them marrying men with Jordanian citizenship. They still worried a lot about their two sons' future prospects. As men, marriage would not change their legal status.

The fact that foreign residents in Jordan had so many limitations on their day-to-day lives was the major reason why Gazan men were considered undesirable spouses, as voiced by Rahaf at the start of this section. Citizenship passes through the father, and a woman with Jordanian citizenship who marries a Gazan man (or any resident lacking Jordanian citizenship<sup>52</sup>) can only pass some limited rights to her children (following the new regulations of 2016). Marriages between Gazan men and women with Jordanian citizenship, however, did occur. Such couples explained that they found ways to circumvent these difficulties, or learned to cope with them. Imm Mohammad recounted how her daughter married a Gazan man, and said that it was not a problem as he registered properties in the name of his wife who did have a national number, and he was always able to find a good job.<sup>53</sup>

While some families considered Gazan men undesirable partners because of the lack of citizenship, others stressed their closeness and downplayed the effect of lacking national identity papers. The fact that for some interlocutors 'sameness' in other aspects overrode legal status overlaps with the findings of Meier (2010),

51 Palestinian refugees also have access to UNRWA clinics regardless of their citizenship papers, but they provide limited services.

52 Any other foreign resident, however, would be in possession of the citizenship of their country. Gazan residents are stateless.

53 The daughter of Imm Mohammad married over two decades ago, before the changes in the law that provided limited civil rights to children of non-Jordanian fathers. Imm Mohammad, however, did not mention how the marriage of her daughter might have impacted the children as a result. She focused on mentioning that the lack of citizenship did not cause marital tensions between the spouses.



who investigated marriages between Palestinian men and Lebanese women. In Lebanon, such women similarly risk having children lacking legal and civil rights. Meier found that especially for lower-class Palestinians and Lebanese, closeness in background, social and physical proximity, and prior knowledge of the family facilitated the acceptance of these marriages (Meier 2010: 113, 121).<sup>54</sup>

Whereas Palestinians often mentioned legal status as one of the criteria on which they based their decision regarding a marriage match, Syrians discussed their precarious legal status and lack of identity papers as an obstacle to a dignified life, but not as a deciding condition or criterion in terms of seeking marriage matches. Abu Nasser, a Syrian man in his fifties, came to Jordan in 2012. He settled in Wihdat and was followed by his wife and children a year later. Their daughter Eshtiaq married a Palestinian taxi driver from Wihdat. I asked Abu Nasser whether he had objected to the marriage. He answered that of course he did, as now it was out of the question that Eshtiaq would return with her family to Syria, because she and her future children would stay with the Palestinian husband in Jordan. Even though the father was not happy with the match, he realized that his daughter, twenty-six years old at the time, was old enough to make her own decisions, and she chose to marry this man. Abu Nasser insisted that he would try his best to find a Syrian bride for his son Nasser. Neither he nor Eshtiaq herself mentioned the advantage that she had now that she could become a Jordanian citizen, and have her and her future children's legal status secured in Jordan. On the contrary, the fact that she could become a Jordanian citizen was seen negatively, as her father had preferred her to return to Syria once the war was over. When I professed my astonishment at how the future return to Syria was so highly considered, Abu Nasser answered: 'Palestinians have been hoping to return for seventy years. Should we give up after hardly seven?'

Syrian families considered their residency in Jordan temporary. The UNHCR and residency cards played an important role in their lives, as they gave them the legal right to stay in Jordan and were often necessary in order to receive aid. Syrians that entered Jordan illegally often lacked some of these necessary documents, but their possession or lack of them did not come up in conversations regarding marriage prospects. Considering that this research took place in the first decade of Syrian displacement, the importance of residency papers might change with the prolongation of Syrian exile, as Syrians start to consider their residency as more permanent. Just as with Imm and Abu Ayman, the importance of legal status seems to have increased with the years. In the 1990s Gazan families might have

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54 Meier argues that middle-class couples mainly evoked love and personal choice as what facilitated their marriages (2010: 125).

had other priorities they sought in marriage arrangements, but in current times it was clear to the parents that legal status and citizenship were a prerequisite for a good life in Jordan.

The importance of citizenship to refugees, and the rights that accompany it, relates to both the orientation towards the 'homeland' and the place to which refugees are displaced, an orientation that changes with historic events and geopolitical developments. Moreover, it has to do with the nature of the conflict that turned communities into refugees and the notion of return. Palestinians in Jordan were exiled as a result of a settler-colonial project with an impossibility of return in the near future. Whereas the right of return, which is inscribed in international law, is to most Palestinians an undisputable right—the younger generations of Palestinian refugees have come to view return more in symbolic than physical terms (Allan 2014: 196). As the first generation of refugees who have memories of their villages and towns in Palestine are dying, the younger generations insist on the right of return as 'the return of a dignity and humanity long denied them' (Ibid), while simultaneously insisting on full political and civil rights in Jordan. They recognize that the land of Palestine and the original villages their ancestors left are not the same as they were seventy years ago. More importantly, they recognize that their residency in Jordan is long-term and that it is unlikely that the right of return will materialize, at least in the short term.

Syrians, on the other hand, believed that return to Syria was realistic and attainable in the near future. The majority of my interlocutors preferred to wait until the war was over and the political order restored. Some were already considering whether it was a good idea to return already to the areas in Syria that were stable and calm. At the time of writing this chapter, news emerged of the Syrian regime confiscating property and bank accounts of Syrians that had left, and the international community seems more ready than before to accept a final solution with Bashar Al-Assad still in power. It remains to be seen whether these developments will impact Syrian refugees' ability and desire for an imminent return to Syria, or whether they will instead focus on improving their lives in displacement by demanding civil and political rights in the host country.

## Conclusion: marriages in Wihdat

This chapter introduced some of the main practices, debates, and concerns of my interlocutors around marriage, and showed that both displacement and place of residence influence marriage practices and experiences. Wihdat, as a place of res-

idence, takes on different meanings and is experienced differently by the various refugee groups. Part of East Amman, a lower-class neighbourhood of the capital, Wihdat is an important identity marker for its Palestinian residents, especially to those who have been living there for several decades. Syrian interlocutors, on the other hand, consider Wihdat a new and temporary shelter and a safe place where they can live until a return to Syria. Wihdat is home to both groups, but it has different symbolic and affective meanings to Palestinians and Syrians. As such, this chapter showed the importance of investigating the role of place in displacement.

Moreover, the social, spatial and normative organization of Wihdat influences marriage practices such as matchmaking efforts and romantic relationships. It dictates the physical and social space available for couples to get acquainted and spend time together, and influences the process of marriage from acquaintance until the wedding. The role of senior women in finding suitable marriage-matches for their male kin becomes central as they have access to female spaces and networks. While Palestinian and Syrian residents were familiar with these same marriage practices, they differed mostly in how they related to the conclusion of a marriage contract. Most Palestinian families insisted on concluding a marriage contract at court to sign the beginning of an official engagement period and to allow the couple to meet. Syrian families, on the other hand, were trying to adapt to these local expectations as many were accustomed to conclude the marriage contract after the wedding, a practice criticized and penalized in Jordan.

Discourses on what leads to a good and desirable marriage among Wihdat residents provide a critique on centring a dichotomous understanding of traditional and love-based marriages. While these concepts are still used by interlocutors, what mattered most to them was whether a marriage was based on mutual understanding, and whether a couple was able to get acquainted well in advance of the wedding. The importance of the notion of mutual understanding was shared by both the Palestinian and the Syrian residents of Wihdat.

Marriage discourses also revealed the importance of national belonging and citizenship rights in Wihdat. Through marriage, people either transgress or maintain constructed and perceived social boundaries. Place of origin and current place of residence can both act as a marker of identity but so can citizenship, an acquired identity stemming from the legal system of Jordan and its relation to the various refugee groups. Different axes, such as national background, sub-national identifications, and legal status, intersect. At different times and in different contexts, some axes became more important than others, as they depended on the duration of displacement, future prospects, and feelings of affinity, otherness and discrimination in relation to other groups. Marriage discourses highlight which marriages

cross boundaries of the familiar and the desired, and show the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of the different identifications in such discourses.

To conclude, foregrounding a specific refugee experience in marriage practices can replicate the assumption that people in a refugee camp, in displacement, are people without a place, or 'personas non locata' (Gieryn 2000: 482). This chapter has shown that displacement history and experience vary from one person and group to another, and that people create new bonds in displacement that give meaning to their social practices. By focusing on marriage practices, discourses, and identification processes, I have shown that it is necessary to look at the flexibility and multiplicity of identifications, and how they interact with elements of displacement, in order to understand the daily experiences and discourses of refugees.





Wedding invitation banner in Wihdat Camp. Photo taken by author.



## Chapter Three



## Narratives of Vulnerability, Marriage and Displacement

# Narratives of Vulnerability, Marriage and Displacement

The previous chapter showed that marriage practices and discourses among Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan are impacted by a diverse range of issues, such as their histories of displacement, their legal and social positionality in Jordan, and the spatial and social character of Wihdat. Wihdat residents debate the desirability of certain practices, such as early conclusions of the marriage contract and marriages to partners with specific national backgrounds. Development organizations similarly debate marriage practices among refugees and desing intervention projects around the topic. One 'type' of marriage that stands out, as it receives much national and international attention, is a marriage that involves girls (and to a lesser extent boys) under the age of eighteen. Termed 'early' or 'child' marriage, these marriages are problematized by the various organizations as a violation of human rights and a form of gender-based violence.<sup>55</sup>

The topic of early marriage has already been debated in Jordan for many decades. Jordanian activists have been lobbying for an increase in the minimum marriage age and legal reform to limit the practice. More recently, the topic gained increased attention with the arrival of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Stories spread on media platforms and among organizations about Syrian refugee girls married off by their parents, often to wealthy older men from the Gulf countries, in exchange for financial compensation, or to safeguard the daughter's honour and safety. These stories draw a direct link between displacement and an increase in early marriages, and focus on these marriages' negative impact.

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55 The terms 'early marriage' and 'child marriage' were often used by employees, activists and in documents interchangeably. In this chapter I would have preferred to use descriptive terminology, such as 'marriages involving a spouse under the age of eighteen' but due to the length of such a use, I will refer to such marriages as early marriage.



Until 2001, the minimum marriage age was legally set at fifteen for girls and sixteen for boys in the Jordanian Personal Status Law. Women's organizations have campaigned to increase the marriage age for both boys and girls. Pressure for legal reform increased throughout the 1990s as more Jordanian rights and development organizations were established in the era of liberalization that the King initiated. In 2001 the legal marriage age was raised to eighteen for both men and women. The lobby for legal reform continued, however, as the law still allowed for exceptions, according to which girls can marry at the age of fifteen with the special permission of a judge.<sup>56</sup>

Both Jordanian and international development organizations direct their intervention campaigns and their budgets towards the prevention of early marriages.<sup>57</sup> Projects tackle early marriages through lobbying for legal reform of the personal status law, and awareness campaigns with youth, families, and community leaders. These campaigns and projects take place in Jordanian cities, Palestinian camps, rural areas, and more recently in the Syrian camps. Most of the financial support for these projects comes from foreign embassies, and international and inter-governmental agencies, many of which are active in international alliances that consider early marriage a global problem.<sup>58</sup> These organizations also conduct studies on the prevalence of early marriages in Jordan and publish reports and documents on the topic.

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56 Since 2001, the Chief Justice Department has twice issued instructions for regulations around the exception clause. In 2010 the department stated that the exception could only be granted by a committee of judges, instead of depending only on the opinion of one judge. Nevertheless, organizations noted that the judges rarely followed these instructions and that the special permit seemed to be readily granted. In June 2017 new regulations were put in place to clarify the conditions which allowed for exceptions to be granted. These conditions include an age limit for the husband, the court's assurance that the fiancée is aware of the fact that she can insert conditions into her marriage contract, that the marriage should not interfere with her education, that the couple has to attend a course on marriage prior to the wedding, and that the bride's guardian has to consent to the marriage. Rights activists and organizations are not satisfied yet, as they note that the law has many loopholes and unclear statements, and still call for the whole exception clause to be eliminated. See Husseini (2017) for the debate surrounding these new regulations.

57 For a systematic mapping of the various international organizations that work on early marriages among refugees in Jordan, and have published documents on the topic, see Hutchinson (forthcoming). There are also several Jordanian organizations that work on the topic, such as the Jordanian Women's Union and the Sisterhood is Global Institute in Jordan (SIGI).

58 One of the largest alliances is Girls not Brides, a global network working on eliminating early marriages.

This chapter examines a specific narrative on early marriage these development organizations produce through an analysis of two key documents. I argue that the problematization of early marriages produces a narrative of vulnerability that has serious practical consequences. According to this development narrative, displacement and poverty combined with local cultural norms lead to early marriages of which young refugee girls are the victims. This development narrative's problematization of early marriages contributes to reducing refugee girls—and to some extent their families—to vulnerable agentless subjects. In the following sections I build on Gilson (2017) to show that the narrative that is produced in these reports is reductive, for three main reasons. First, the narrative promotes a direct and clear causal link between displacement and tradition on the one hand, and oppressive marriage practices on the other, of which young refugee girls are the victims. It ignores the ambiguous, differential and complex ways in which both displacement and cultural norms might influence marriage practices and refugee lives more broadly. Second, this narrative produces a gendered understanding of vulnerability that manifests itself as a fixed condition, a character trait, of specific persons or groups—in this case refugee girls. Finally, in this understanding of vulnerability, victimhood emerges as a totalizing condition of weakness and passivity that is incompatible with any form of agency.

Based on ethnographic material, I complicate this narrative and show aspects that remain concealed in this framing of early marriage. I demonstrate that while refugee families live in precarious conditions and face various hardships due to their displacement and its aftermath, refugee girls nonetheless consider themselves active participants and social actors in their marriages. In addition, I show that Wihdat residents problematize early marriages differently from the development organizations, as they focus on the character of the groom and the existence of mutual understanding as the most important elements of a desirable marriage, that may—or may not—be impacted by age. Moreover, I illustrate the importance of recognizing men's vulnerability in displacement. I also show that the particular framing of early marriages in the development narrative has practical consequences on policymaking, as proposed interventions remain limited, small-scale, depoliticized, and often irrelevant to the daily realities of refugees in Jordan.

In order to analyse the narrative produced in development literature on early marriage I look at two key documents, a UNICEF study titled *A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014*, and a briefing by Save the Children titled *Too Young to Wed: The Growing Problem of Child Marriage among Syrian Girls in Jordan* (2014). The two documents are in many respects different. The UNICEF report is one of the first in-depth studies on early marriages in Jordan, with its findings cited and used by other local and international organizations (Hutchinson and Abuqudairi forthcoming). It pro-

vides a nationwide statistical analysis of marriages, divorces, and spousal age gaps in Jordan for the years 2005–2014 involving spouses aged fifteen to seventeen.<sup>59</sup> The report is mainly based on primary sources, and includes qualitative research based on interviews and focus group discussions with families and community figures. It explains the factors contributing to—and the impacts of—early marriages. The forty-four pages discuss early marriages among four groups: Jordanians, Palestinian refugees, Syrian refugees, and Iraqi refugees.

The Save the Children report, on the other hand, focuses only on early marriages among Syrian refugees in Jordan. While some of its findings are based on interviews by Save the Children staff, most presented data is secondary and comes from the aforementioned UNICEF report, in addition to other assessments and reports published by the UN and other development organizations.<sup>60</sup> It is a much shorter document—twelve pages only—and focuses on the reasons and impacts of early marriage, in addition to providing key strategies for preventing early marriages and reducing their risks.

The two reports target different audiences. The UNICEF report ends with a set of recommendations aimed at informing policy. The report addresses the Chief Justice Department of Jordan, the government of Jordan including various ministries, Jordanian civil society, and international humanitarian and development actors. The Save the Children report, however, addresses one public only: donors. They call on donors to fund, support and invest in projects that work on preventing early marriages.

Despite their differences, the two reports also overlap in several respects. Both reports are in English, and in addition to Jordanian governmental offices and civil society that are directly addressed in the UNICEF report, the reports are meant to inform the policy and funding schemes of international organizations and actors. They were both published in 2014, in the first years of Syrian displacement. Save the Children frames early marriage as a problem directly connected to displacement. UNICEF, which does not only discuss early marriage among refugees,

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59 Since UNICEF relies on official statistics in its qualitative research, it includes in its definition any registered marriage involving a person under the age of eighteen. Nevertheless, the report recognizes, just as mentioned in the previous chapter, that many residents in Jordan conclude the marriage contract in court to indicate the start of the engagement, while the wedding and cohabitation occurs later on (UNICEF 2014: 6). Without explicitly stating so, their statistics also include couples that were engaged with *kitab* before the age of eighteen but were not married (they might have subsequently gotten married after the age of eighteen).

60 Among others: UNHCR, OCHA, UNFPA, WHO, and War Child Holland.

pays special attention to Syrian and Palestinian refugees,<sup>61</sup> and connects early marriage to displacement and refugee-ness as well. The most important similarity in the framing of early marriages in both reports is that they contribute to the production of a similar narrative on early marriage and vulnerability.<sup>62</sup>

## Vulnerability between displacement and tradition

The cover of the Save the Children document includes a short, to-the-point quote, a story that frames the report:

Maha is just 13 years old but she's already married. Her husband is ten years older than her. 'I didn't want to get married. I wanted to finish my studies and become a doctor. But my parents forced me to marry. My father was worried of sexual harassment here... I am pregnant now. [The foetus] is very weak because I'm so young and my body isn't ready (Save the Children 2014: cover page).

This short quote is a good example of the central elements of the development narrative on early marriage. First, Maha refers to her marriage as forced on her. Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, early marriages are equated in the reports with forced marriages. The reason for Maha's marriage in this quote is explained as the father's fear of sexual harassment, a fear that in the reports emerges as a result of living in dense refugee camps and other insecure living conditions stemming from displacement. Early marriage is explained as the main remedy parents find recourse to in order to safeguard their daughters and prevent sexual harassment.

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61 As will be expanded on later, UNICEF includes only Palestinians that lack Jordanian citizenship under the term Palestinian refugees. Palestinian-Jordanians are included under the statistics and findings that pertain to Jordanian citizens.

62 I chose these two reports because they are two key documents published on refugees in Jordan and early marriage. They are also representative of the wider discourse on early marriages among refugees, as other documents published by UN and other international agencies present similar arguments and framings. For documents specifically on Jordan, see for example UN Women (2013) and the various publications of the Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Sub-Working Group (UNHCR Operational Data Portal).

Without learning anything else about the husband, the only information the reader receives is the fact that the husband is ten years older than thirteen-year-old Maha. The emphasis on the age gap between spouses is central to this narrative. Both the UNICEF and Save the Children's report explain early marriage among refugees as resulting from a combination of conditions of displacement, poverty, and tradition. UNICEF summarizes the contributing factors to early marriages to be 'poverty; the need to provide *sutra*;<sup>63</sup> long-established tradition; and the practice of having large families' (2014: 26). Similarly, under the section titled 'Why are more girls being forced to marry?' the Save the Children report argues that an increase of early marriage under conditions of displacement is connected to gender inequality, and protection from sexual violence and other hardships 'exacerbated by the conflict', that are 'often intimately linked to traditional gender roles' (Ibid: 4). Another factor stated is 'poverty and unemployment' (Ibid: 5). UNICEF acknowledges that even though most respondents they had interviewed for the report were in agreement over which factors led them to decide on an early marriage, some respondents emphasized particular aspects over others (Ibid: 26). Nevertheless, both reports promote a unidirectional equation in which structural conditions—specifically displacement and poverty—combined with conservative cultural norms, lead to forced early marriages of vulnerable, young girls.

As shown by the quote above, early marriages are problematized because of their impact on girls' lives. Education and health are mentioned in both reports as the two main areas on which an early marriage has a negative impact. The UNICEF report states that girls that marry are less likely to complete their high school or higher education (2014: 29-30). By emphasizing education, the narrative promotes a specific idea on the proper and desirable future of young refugee girls. Instead of being denied a childhood through marriage, girls are supposed to defer marriage and having children until they have completed their school and/or higher education. Their vulnerability in the face of displacement, poverty and cultural practices imposed by parents, robs them of such opportunities.

UNICEF explains the negative consequences of early marriage on health by stating that early pregnancies have a negative impact on the young mother's overall health (2014: 29-30). Save the Children's report uses a more loaded and dramatized terminology. Under the subtitle 'girls forced to marry older men,' it argues that the large age gap leads to more risks of abuse, violence, and exploitation (Ibid: 6). An urgency is detected in the title 'The Deadly Risks of Child Pregnancy'

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63 UNICEF includes a footnote with an explanation of the word *sutra*, stating that it is a culturally accepted concept which does not have a single interpretation but in general refers to safeguarding one's future and protection from hardship (2014: 26).

(Ibid: 8), stating that stillbirth and new-born death rates are higher among young mothers and that girls' health faces 'devastating consequences' because of sexual activity at such a young age (Ibid). Early marriage can also lead to physical and mental health issues (Ibid).

The two reports focus on women's health in explaining the negative impacts of early marriages. They locate girls' vulnerability in the female body, and early marriage is problematized because of the sexual and reproductive activities involved that put them in harm's way. This problematization in essence produces the female body as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection from the impacts of displacement and tradition.

The narrative is illustrated with the use of direct quotes, such as Maha's. The UNICEF report includes quotes from young brides, their parents, social workers and religious figures in the six pages dedicated to the qualitative analysis. Save the Children includes quotes on most of their twelve pages. These direct testimonial-like quotes take function as proof, as eyewitness accounts the reader is exposed to when learning about the 'victims' of early marriages in Jordan.

These testimonials simultaneously decontextualize women's marriage stories, their experiences and reflections, and as a result remove any complexity and ambiguity.<sup>64</sup> Problematizations, explaining certain phenomena or practices as a problem, 'necessarily reduce complexity' because they simplify a range of factors in order to present an issue as a specific kind of problem (Bacchi 2009: xii). This simplification of early marriages is also evident in the quotes featured in the two reports. Some of these quotes mention the multi-faceted impact of living in displacement and the pressures families face. Even then, however, the presented effect of these conditions remains simplified: the authors draw a direct causal link between the difficult conditions of displacement and the victimization of young girls.

For instance, Save the Children's report includes a quote by a Syrian father who says that he took the decision to have his daughter Reem marry at a young age because of the unstable circumstances caused by displacement (Save the Children 2014: 5). According to him, she was unable to continue her education because there were many men on the streets on her way to school. He therefore had to choose between either keeping her at home or 'take the decision for her to get married early' (Ibid). He adds that 'of course, I didn't make that decision on my own; it was a family decision and I consulted with my daughter and gave her the freedom to choose... circumstances made us take the decision quickly and get her married off. We have no regrets' (Ibid).

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64 See Cabot (2016) for a detailed analysis of the effect of using direct testimonials in policy documents and reports on refugees.

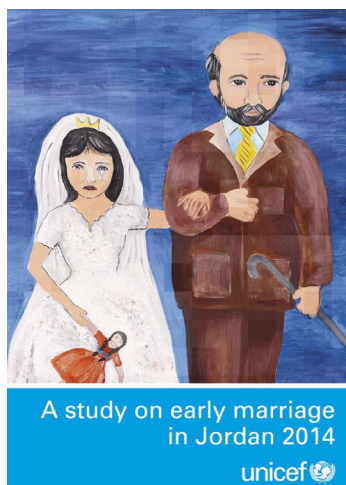
On the one hand, the family is presented as a victim of living in displacement. The father is quoted saying: 'We didn't feel that we had any stability living in a place like this, with an enormous number of refugees' (Ibid). This impact of displacement on the family was totalizing, as they thought of themselves as having no choice but to opt for marriage. On the other hand, the father is cast as the patriarch who could not allow his daughter to complete her education due to the presence of men on the streets. At first, the whole family, including the father, are recognized as victims of displacement—only to then portray the father as the violator of his daughter's rights. Despite the fact that the father mentioned he consulted his daughter, the report does not comment or elaborate on the issue of consent, nor does it engage seriously (or at all) with this part of the father's statement.<sup>65</sup>

This narrative presumes a causality between displacement's insecure conditions and early marriage enforced by fathers. This mirrors a more general assumption in humanitarian and development work that crisis and displacement lead to social disintegration and moral chaos, which in turn leads refugee men to perpetrate sexual and gender-based violence (Turner 2017). According to Turner, the generalizing assumption 'about causalities between displacement, masculinity and violence' obscures 'other ways in which male refugees react to camp life' (Turner 2017: 50). In the development narrative on early marriage, the impact of displacement on fathers seems to be limited to enforcing marriage on their young daughters.

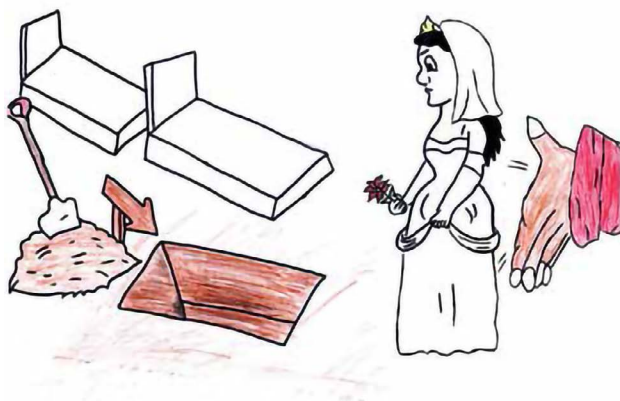
In addition to a direct encounter with the 'voice' of these girls through the inclusion of direct quotes, the reports also include visual material that strengthens this early marriage narrative. The cover choice of the UNICEF report is a drawing made by a 'refugee youth as part of a UNICEF-supported psycho-social support programme of the International Medical Corps in Za'atari refugee camp' (cover page, see Drawing 1). The cover portrays a young girl holding a doll, with a tear rolling down her cheek. She is holding the arm of an old man, who most probably represents her husband. The drawing is made by a refugee girl herself during a workshop. Supposed proof of the fears of these young girls, it portrays the loss of childhood through marriage to elderly men against the girls' will, the exact narrative that the report is promoting.

65 On the same page as the father's quote, the report includes the following paragraph: 'Focus group discussions indicate that women and girls are more likely to have concerns about girls getting married at a young age, but these concerns are often overruled by fathers who are much more likely to be in favour of child marriage. It is important to acknowledge the variation in these attitudes though, with some fathers rejecting child marriage for their daughters' (Save the Children 2014: 5). This is the only indication in the whole report that some fathers might object to an early marriage.





Drawing I (UNICEF 2014: cover page)



Drawing III (Save the Children 2014: 6)



Drawing II (Save the Children 2014: 5)



Drawing IV (Save the Children 2014: 1)

Save the Children's report has more visual material, as its twelve pages contain six drawings (referred to in the report as 'caricatures') made by Syrian girls who followed a workshop on the dangers of early marriage in Za'atari camp. These drawings are similar in essence to the cover page of the UNICEF report. It presents young girls, often holding signs of childlike innocence such as a doll or a lollypop, marrying much older men (see Drawing II). One drawing shows the young bride



being pushed towards her grave (Drawing III), while another one shows the father counting the money he received in return for his daughter's marriage (Drawing IV).

The drawings are made by refugee girls themselves during intervention projects of the organizations, in which they learned about children rights and the negative impacts of early marriages on girls. In the drawings featured in the reports, the girls cast themselves as victims of men (the much older husbands and the fathers) and present themselves as having lost their childhood due to the marriage. The drawings, similar to the quotes, function as direct testimony of how the girls that participate in the various development projects see an early marriage—as a monetary transaction, and as digging their own graves, waiting to be saved from their geriatric future husbands by the organizations.<sup>66</sup>

The quotes, drawings, and written material leave many elements unquestioned—elements that will be discussed in the following sections of this chapter. For instance, displacement is manifested here only in fear of sexual harassment and poverty. Nevertheless, traumas of war and displacement influence childhoods, and refugee lives more broadly, in far more complex and multi-faceted ways. In the reports, its impact is limited to inducing insecure living conditions and poverty (UNICEF 2014: 11), and to having one main outcome: the oppression of young girls through their marriage. Furthermore, besides the fact that in the last quote Maha's husband is mentioned to be ten years older than her, the reader does not learn anything about the husbands, the marriage process, and marital life. Husbands are only relevant as an indication of the age gap between them and the young brides, a fact also visible in the visual material that only features husbands as much older men. While husbands are featured in these narratives to indicate a large age gap, and fathers are included as those enforcing early marriages, young girls and their mothers emerge as passive victims. It is therefore important to take into account how girls and mothers reflect on and participate in early marriages. Finally, the young girls lament that due to their marriage they were unable to complete their education. Maha, for example, wanted to become a doctor. Marriage is presented as the main obstacle to girls' education. It is crucial to investigate which other socio-economic, political and cultural elements might influence the future prospects of

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66 On the last page of the Save the Children's report is a picture with twelve of the girls that followed their workshop holding the drawings they made (the picture is half a page and the drawings are not very clear). One drawing includes a girl sitting on the beach and watching the sea. Another one features a family at a playground with the father actively seen as playing with his children, probably as a scene of how things should be. It is interesting that these two drawings did not make the selection of drawings included in an enlarged size inside the report. Just like the quotes, the selection included in the report are those that confirm the specific reductive narrative of early marriages.

these girls. While these various elements that might complicate the narrative are ignored, the vulnerability of Maha and the other young girls emerge as what Gilson terms a 'reductively negative understanding' of vulnerability that is 'equated with susceptibility to harm; it is considered a condition of weakness, dependency, passivity, incapacitation, incapability, and powerlessness' (2016: 74).

## Producing the proper victim: gender and agency

In addition to explaining the factors and consequences of early marriages in a reductive manner, the reports also produce a specific narrative on vulnerability that is intimately linked with victimhood. Humanitarian discourses, especially those that are aimed at generating international support and funding, produce the image of the proper and authentic victim that is able to elicit compassion (Feldman 2015a, Redfield 2012, Fassin 2011, Johnson 2011). This has led to the feminization of beneficiaries of humanitarian interventions. Women and children are more easily identified as proper victims than men, as they are considered inherently vulnerable and in need of aid (Feldman 2015a, L. Turner 2015, 2017). By identifying vulnerability as a character trait of women—especially young women and girls—they can attain the status of victims in need, and therefore deserving of relief. One central characteristic of the victim is that she is passive and has no agency or control over her own life. The coupling of a gendered understanding of vulnerability with passivity is evident in the reports discussed here.

The UNICEF report includes a quote that reinforces oppositional conceptions of gender, in which women are passive victims while men are constructed as perpetrators of forced early marriage. A Syrian mother is quoted in a separate box in between paragraphs stating:

No, I do not like early marriages, even though my daughters were married off at an early age simply because their father wanted it that way. I tried to stop him, but there was nothing I can do. I told him to wait until a better young suitor comes, but he refused... I really wished that they had completed their education but our customs in the countryside are strict ... and my girls accepted.

*Mother of a Syrian Bride (UNICEF 2014: 26)*

This quote highlights rural customs and paints the father as the despot who made the decision despite his wife's objections, framing these as the contributing factors to the daughters' marriages. Presenting early marriages as a harmful cultural practice reinforces this gendered understanding of vulnerability, as it produces girls and women as victims in need of saving (Abu-Lughod 2013). The image of what Mohanty calls the 'Third World Woman' (1988) depicts the stereotypical suffering victim of oppressive patriarchal cultures, who is 'best qualified to pass the test of innocence, insofar as women from the third world or Global South are often equated with passivity and apolitical corporeal existence' (Ticktin 2017: 582).

The main regret of the quoted mother, presented in this quote as agentless and powerless in the face of her husband, seems to be the daughters' inability to complete their education. By using the decontextualized quote however, the reader does not learn of the daughters' desired futures, and whether education would have been a possible path if they had not gotten married. This development narrative does not question whether these young brides wanted to complete education in the first place. In contrast, the desire to complete school is assumed throughout the narrative, and the only impediment to education seems to be marriage. Furthermore, the fact that the mother's concern was not so much the age of the bride, but that she preferred a better (and younger?) suitor, is left undiscussed. Perhaps the mother's main issue was the character of the man rather than the age of her daughter.

More importantly, one aspect the reports leave uncomplicated is the issue of consent. A recurring theme in the organizations' reports is equating early marriage with forced marriage. The Save the Children report explains as follows: 'Child marriage is a human rights issue, due to the nature of a child's consent—or lack of consent—to enter into such a relationship. The right to 'free and full' consent to a marriage is recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (2014: 2). Besides these two sentences, nowhere does the report expand on the notion of consent, and refers throughout the text to the practice as being forced on girls. This is despite several quotes of parents, including the Syrian father in the previous section and the Syrian mother featured in the UNICEF report, who explicitly mention that their daughters had agreed to the match.

A UN Women report on gender-based violence and early marriage explains how early marriages are equated with forced marriages. It argues that persons under the age of eighteen are children who are subject to 'overwhelming pressures that invalidate their consent' (UN Women 2013: 14). Girls often feel pressured to accept a marriage proposal. A quote by a Palestinian woman in the UNICEF report, for example, states that she felt embarrassed when her uncle asked her whether she agreed to a marriage proposal, and she agreed despite her lack of enthusiasm

(ibid: 29). The argument assumes the age of eighteen as an arbitrary indicator of the ability to give consent and ignores any agentive capacities of these young women and girls themselves.<sup>67</sup> Despite the fact that most parents in the quotes feel the need to mention that the daughters agreed to the match, this does not translate to a serious engagement with the question of consent, or a complicating of the assumption that the young age in and of itself is what constitutes the girls as victims of forced marriage.

Central to these narratives is the assumption of a universalized concept of the childhood/adulthood binary and what this assumption entails. As Cole and Durham show, age categories and definitions of childhood can vary by historical periods, across cultures, class, and gender, and are affected by socioeconomic factors and processes of globalization (2008: 5-8). The concept of 'child' found in international law and development discourses is based on 'the globalization of a particular concept of childhood' (Boyden 1997: 191), a European conception that 'cannot be detached from other variables such as class, ethnicity and gender' (Prout and James 2003: 5).<sup>68</sup> Boyden similarly argues that the view prevalent in international rights discourses that childhood is not determined by society or culture, but is rather a fixed biological and psychological category, is based on a particular view of the industrial North that has been exported to the South with colonial rule and the increase of the United Nations' influence (Boyden 1997: 202-203).

One of the main distinctions between childhood and adulthood is sexuality (Baird 2008: 293). Children are assumed to be asexual, while marriages and active sexuality 'threaten the discourse of innocence and purity often associated with children as well as normative chronological life scripts' (Khooja-Moolji 2015: 41). Important to note is that the discussion around sexuality of child brides in the Global South differs from narratives on sexuality in the Global North, specifically around teen pregnancies, where the girl is not categorized as 'child,' but as an 'adolescent' girl who is seen as capable of sexual desires and agentive in enacting them (Khooja-Moolji 2015: 50).

To recognize a degree of consent or agency on the part of the girls in their marriages goes against their image as passive victims. Vulnerability and victimi-

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67 For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between age and consent in Muslim family law see Welchman (2011).

68 The argument put forward here is that this globalized concept of childhood stems from European consumerist processes and capitalism, as schools became important institutions for training young people for the industrial world during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, during which children and the period of 'childhood' came to be associated with 'qualities of innocence and nobility' (Boyden 1997: 191).

zation are often presented as incompatible with agency (Gilson 2016). The development narrative on early marriage stresses the innocence and weakness of the involved girl, as women and girls can only maintain their victimhood status as long as they present a specific form of victimhood: one that is intimately connected to the concept of innocence (see Ticktin 2017). As long as the girls are forced into a marriage against their will, and embody a stereotypical tragic figure, they can elicit compassion and be considered innocent victims worthy of aid.<sup>69</sup>

In discussing the case of refugees more generally, Cabot argues that representing refugees as 'vulnerable and tragic figures' silences them 'as active and critical subjects' (Cabot 2016: 648). In the UNICEF and Save the Children reports a similar process is at work. The reader does not learn much about how and why refugee girls might have consented to a marriage, their critical reflections on such marriages, the reflections and roles of their parents beyond the enforcing father and powerless mother, or the complexities of refugee positionalities and experiences. Aspects that do not neatly conform to this narrative or complicate them—such as the question of consent—are left unmentioned.

The representation of refugee girls as passive victims in development literature has far-reaching practical consequences in humanitarian and development work, a thorough investigation of which are beyond the scope of this chapter. These reports are part of a broader development trend that treats vulnerability and victimhood as the criteria on which organizations justify their interventions. The need to reassert true victimhood and vulnerability often pushes beneficiaries of humanitarian aid who are aware of these hierarchical categorizations into performing 'deservingness' (Witcher forthcoming), and lose much-needed aid if their performance is not convincing enough (Cabot 2013). These images also become the basis on which organizations elicit compassion and support for their work, which contributes to depoliticizing the plight of the people they target in their projects (Johnson 2011). The reductive understanding of vulnerability in the development narrative on early marriages explored here, for example, does not allow for women to express any degree of agency in their lives or ambiguity regarding their situation. Therefore, a more nuanced and complete understanding of early marriage is necessary: one that reflects more accurately the diverse and complex experiences of displaced women and men.

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69 Not only girls but also their mothers are cast as powerless in the face of enforcing men and cultural traditions. The reports do mention cases of female-headed households in which the mother decides on an early marriage for her daughter. Nevertheless, while the vulnerability of fathers in displacement translates to forcing a girl into an undesirable marriage, mothers remain cast as agentless victims who accept a marriage despite their dislike of it.

## Complicating vulnerability in early marriage

The inclusion of a lot of 'voice' in the Unicef and Save the Children reports in the form of quotes from interviews and focus group discussions, contributes to a simplified narrative of early marriages and the lives of refugees. That is because the selected quotes remain decontextualized and unidimensional. While I recognize that contextualization is always partial, I argue for the importance of contextualizing early marriage cases in order to understand marriage experiences and their impact on the people involved. By including a wider variety of actors, their dilemmas and reflections, and their embeddedness in complex social, political and affective structures, vulnerability emerges as a potential that is neither totalizing nor a fixed condition of passive victims of oppression. I show that whereas war and displacement have a great influence on the lives of refugees, the way they influence marriage practices differs from one case to another. Refugee girls, and their families, are indeed vulnerable in many ways—but they often also consider themselves active participants in their marriages. Vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive.

There is a mismatch between the elements highlighted in the development narrative on the one hand, and local discourses on early marriage on the other. Organizations foreground the age of the bride as the element that makes early marriage problematic. Interlocutors, however, focus on the prospects of mutual understanding in a marriage that might depend on the age of the bride and groom, but not necessarily so. Moreover, ethnographic data shows the necessity of detaching vulnerability from a dichotomous understanding that equates women with victims and men with perpetrators. Even in cases when a marriage seems to abide by all the elements of the development narrative, vulnerability does not manifest itself as a totalizing condition but leaves room for young girls to navigate the limitations imposed on them. As such, when understanding vulnerability as emerging from specific conditions, it becomes clear that it is relational and produced differently depending on social, legal, cultural and economic contexts.

### AGENCY IN DISPLACEMENT

Imm Rasem was a Syrian widow from a rural area in Daraa. She came to Jordan with her five children after her husband was killed during the shelling of their house. Her eldest daughter Rand got engaged while still in Syria. Rand was aged fifteen and Mahmoud her fiancé was fourteen years older. They got married three months

later in Jordan after the family moved to Wihdat. Mina, one year younger than her sister, was fourteen years old when the family arrived in Jordan. Soon afterward she agreed to the marriage proposal of her nineteen-year-old cousin, who had also moved to Jordan with his family. The family was aware of the legal requirement to conclude the marriage contract at court before the wedding ceremony, but the judge rejected the marriage application as Mina had not yet turned fifteen years old, the minimum legal age for marriage in Jordan. Imm Rasem pleaded with the judge to conclude the contract, but to no avail. With the help of her relatives, she was able to register the marriage in Syria just in time to show the marriage contract at the hospital when Mina went into labour with her first child.

Imm Rasem said she wanted to be honest with me. Even though she had preferred to wait with her daughters' marriages until they were older, she agreed to their marriages because of the family's financial difficulties. Her son Rasem was seventeen years old and tried to find a source of income by working at the Wihdat market. Since it was illegal for Syrians to work in Jordan, Rasem had already been arrested twice by the police and threatened with imprisonment if caught again. Imm Rasem received some *zakat* money,<sup>70</sup> and tried to gain some income by picking *mulukhiyah* leaves for vegetable vendors, but the family was hardly able to cover the monthly expenses. Now that her two daughters were married, Imm Rasem said, their husbands were responsible for providing for them. She assured me, however, that she would not let her twelve-year-old daughter Labiba get married before she was eighteen.

My conversation with Imm Rasem brought forward the various elements that are highlighted in the development narrative, especially in its discussion of female-headed households. Imm Rasem's widowhood and ensuing displacement to Jordan put her and her family in a precarious economic situation. As a widow, her husband was not part of the daughters' marriages. Rather, Imm Rasem decided on her daughters' marriages, which displacement and its resulting poverty pushed her to agree to. Even though Imm Rasem believed her daughters to be too young for marriage, she agreed to the marriages as a means to relieve herself of some of the responsibilities of taking care of her daughters.

About two years after my initial interview with Imm Rasem, I went for a visit to Amman and had the chance to talk to the daughters directly.<sup>71</sup> Rand and Mina's narrations of how they got married shows that even though their mother agreed

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70 Alms given out to widows and orphans by the *zakat* organization in Wihdat.

71 During fieldwork, I met the daughters repeatedly but never got the chance to speak to them separately in the form of an interview. I returned to Amman about eighteen months after completing fieldwork, and I finally got the chance to have an in-depth conversation with them.

to the matches, they themselves were active participants in the decision to get married. Displacement played a role to some extent in both cases, but manifested itself differently. Instead of seeing displacement as a clear push-factor of an early marriage, their stories show it was the accumulation of a variety of factors, motivations, and affections that paved the way for the marriages, as I will expand on below. These elements come to light by contextualizing the marriages and looking at the marriage as a process, instead of picking specific decontextualized quotes to confirm an already assumed narrative. In addition, by letting Mina and Rand narrate their own story, my aim is to highlight the young women's agency instead of disregarding it due to the fact that they were under the age of eighteen when they got married, as is often the case in development reports. Even though children might face tremendous pressures and power imbalances that make them vulnerable, they are also social actors who possess agentic capabilities (El-Youssef 2012).

When Imm Rasem told me about her daughter Rand's marriage, she expressed her regret at allowing her daughter to marry so young. She could not handle Rand's screams in the hospital when she went into labour. Imm Rasem told me she felt ashamed and saddened while sitting among other women at the hospital because Rand was too young to bear all this pain. Curious about Rand's take on her marriage I asked her to tell me how it all happened. The match was initiated by her husband Mahmoud's mother, who saw Rand while at a relative's wedding in Damascus. Mahmoud's mother approached Rand and Imm Rasem to ask if they were interested in a marriage to her son. Mahmoud, however, was already in Jordan, and thus the couple was unable to meet at the time.<sup>72</sup> Abu Rasem, Rand's father, was still alive and voiced his agreement to the choice of groom. After her father was killed in shelling by regime forces, Rand went for another visit to her relatives in Damascus, where Mahmoud was home visiting. The couple met and they got the chance to get acquainted: 'We asked each other whether we were previously engaged, whether and what sort of work we did, and our ages. He is fourteen years older than me. I felt it was nicer [*aḥla*] for the man to be older. He is more understanding [*metfahhem*]. I went back to my mother and let her know that we sat together and liked each other. After I told my mother, we gave them the reply and they came to read the *fatiḥa*.' They held a small engagement party soon after. Rand had already quit school a few years before, 'after the seventh grade. Not because of the war, but because I did not like school.'

When Imm Rasem's family came to Jordan, they had to stay in Za'atari camp for three months, during which Mahmoud visited every Thursday and stayed over-

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72 Mahmoud used to travel to Jordan for work before the war. When the war erupted, he decided it was safer for him to stay in Jordan as he did not want to become involved in the fighting.



night. Rand and Mahmoud also often talked on the phone during their engagement period. Mahmoud had Palestinian-Jordanian relatives in Wihdat who were able to bail the family out of Za'atari. The couple got married that same week in Wihdat.

At the time of the interview, Rand and her husband had two sons and were chosen by UNHCR for resettlement in the United Kingdom. They were very excited, and Rand was looking forward to learning English and starting to work. I asked her how she would be able to learn English if she never liked to study. She answered that this had changed now. She had already downloaded a language app and had started to learn the alphabet. She was smart and learned fast, she said. Life in Jordan was difficult, especially financially. They owed four months of rent and Mahmoud could only find irregular jobs. They hoped to improve their financial situation in the UK, and she insisted on learning something that would enable her to work and earn a living.

In Rand's narration, the first steps to the match had already taken place before the death of Abu Rasem and Imm Rasem's subsequent widowhood and displacement. Protests in Syria had already turned into armed conflict, but in Rand's account her match was not influenced directly by war and displacement. By looking at Rand's marriage as a process, including the first steps of the matchmaking, it becomes clear that Rand saw herself as an active participant in the match. She met Mahmoud for the first time without her parents present, and she conveyed to her mother upon return from Damascus that she liked Mahmoud and was interested in him. Her father was not an enforcing figure and was mainly absent; however, Rand's agreement to the match was eased by her knowledge that her late father would have agreed. Imm Rasem had no objections to the marriage either even though she later conveyed to me her regrets of allowing the marriage to happen at such a young age. Rand's young age and the fact that Mahmoud was fourteen years older was not problematized by the couple themselves.

The fact that Rand's fiancé had the resources and connections to bail the family out of Za'atari and bring them to Wihdat—one of the factors mentioned in both reports as motivating early marriages—helped the family settle in Jordan. However, it was not a reason or motivation for the match to have happened in the first place, as the match was initiated by Mahmoud's mother after Mahmoud had already left legally to Jordan before the marriage, and Imm Rasem had not yet decided to leave Syria.

The impact of displacement surfaces in the marriage of Rand's sister Mina, but the impact is multi-faceted and ambiguous rather than a clear-cut push factor of an early marriage. Mina, a quiet person and less talkative than her sister, was about nineteen years old and had just given birth to her second child when we sat

together to talk. Married at the age of fourteen to her cousin of nineteen years old, I had to ask her many questions to learn about her marriage:<sup>73</sup>

Mina: We came to Jordan, and my cousin asked for my hand in marriage. He said that he liked me [*kan mo'jab*], but I did not know. I had many men coming for me before, but I did not accept because I was young. With this cousin, my mother loved him and used to always tell him that she wanted him for one of her daughters. My father had said the same thing. I did not feel pressure though, and did not think that marrying a relative would be a problem.

Dina: How is living in Jordan?

Mina: Better than in Syria, now that there is war. We lived through war, and were often afraid. Now we are comfortable. We do not interact with Jordanians much though.

Dina: Did you feel at that time that you were ready to get married? What did you feel when you gave birth?

Mina: When I gave birth the first time, I was very happy, and my husband as well. Also with the second child, but more so with the first. I felt love, and that we made a family.

At the time of Mina's marriage, Imm Rasem had just moved to Jordan. Imm Rasem was worried that she would be unable to take care of her children financially. By having her daughters marry, it became their husbands' responsibility to take care of them. Mina's account, however, shows that she experienced her marriage differently from her mother, and put the focus on other elements. She was surprised that her cousin was interested in her, but at the same time she knew that both her parents were fond of this cousin. This played a role in her acceptance of the proposal. They had just come to Jordan and she did not know much about this new country. Mina found herself in an unfamiliar environment, and she expressed the fear and trauma she had experienced in the last years of being in Syria. She finally felt safe in Jordan, a feeling enhanced by creating her own family with her husband and children.

The fact that Rand and Mina were social actors in their own right does not mean that they were not vulnerable. Similar to the situation of the family featured in the Save the Children report, Imm Rasem and her family found themselves in

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73 Mina said she had no idea what she could tell me that could be of interest to me, so our conversation mainly consisted of me asking questions and her responding with short answers.

unfamiliar territory with no clear future prospects. The sense of instability and precarity encouraged Imm Rasem, and perhaps also her daughter Mina, to more readily agree to the marriage proposal. Mina had thought of herself as too young to marry before, but when her cousin asked for her hand in marriage she decided to agree. The impacts of displacement as discussed in the reports are summarized as economic hardship and feelings of insecurity. Mina's example shows that emotions, the need for intimacy, the desire to build a family, and the mental state of girls after fleeing war also play a role in how displacement influences marriage decisions (see Chapter Five). As such, vulnerability resulting from displacement manifests itself in diverse ways and is not homogeneous in its impact or experience.

Rand took the decision to marry Mahmoud when she met him after her father had been killed. Having suffered due to war and later displacement did not translate into passivity. Rand and her husband were still facing economic difficulties, but Rand was working hard on learning English to make the most of their future resettlement to the UK. Rather than assuming vulnerability as a character trait of refugee girls, vulnerability emerges as a 'condition of potential' (Gilson 2016: 78) that leaves room for certain degrees of agency.

## CULTURAL EXPLANATIONS AND MISSING MEN

The development narrative explains the causes of early marriage to lie in a combination of displacement, poverty and traditions that are rooted in specific local cultures. The narrative's inclusion of tradition and culture adds to the production of a dichotomous understanding of vulnerability in which women are passive victims and men are their oppressors. The UNICEF report emphasizes that marriage is culturally considered an achievement as unmarried women are socially stigmatized (UNICEF 2014: 26).<sup>74</sup> It also mentions that *sutra*, the need to maintain the girl and her family's good reputation and secure the girl's future, is often mentioned as a factor by respondents. Save the Children adds that while 'child marriage is often arranged in order to 'protect' girls, this motivation is often intimately linked to traditional gender roles and inequalities, where a girl's value is largely determined by her upholding family honour, producing children and remaining within the home' (Ibid: 4-5). Another motivation for early marriage mentioned is restoring family 'honour' after rape (quotations in original) (Ibid: 5). The focus of this narrative is on cultural norms and values as negative and oppressive to women and girls. The narrative also produces a reductive link in which culture motivates action.

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74 Marriages are also often considered an achievement for men, but this is left out of the report.

Marriage before the age of eighteen was not an unfamiliar phenomenon to my interlocutors. As the UNICEF report states, marriage in general is considered an achievement and a valued and natural step in life. However, this alone does not explain why some girls and families opt for marriage before the age of eighteen. Instead of viewing cultural values as dictating action, as a 'unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction' (Swidler 1986: 277), culture consists of often conflicting values, rituals, and guides to action that function like a 'toolkit', which informs people's strategies of action (Ibid). Cultural values and practices are familiar modes of action that people turn to or choose from. As such, marriage before the age of eighteen was part of the existing 'toolkit' that interlocutors were familiar with. Whereas some interlocutors problematized and criticized marriages of girls they deemed too young, others focused on characteristics of the husband and marriage that overrode the importance of age.

In the development narrative, culture is mainly equated with patriarchy, in which oppressive men are driven to harmful practices against women. Husbands are only included in the development narrative when the age gap between them and their wife is significant, or when they are abusive. Fathers are only included when they are the ones enforcing an early marriage. These elements are an important part of the visual and textual representations of these marriages. While the reader learns about the hopes and dreams of the young women, the reader stays in the dark as to who the husbands are. Men are hardly featured as 'sons, lovers, husbands, fathers—with whom women might have shared interests and concerns, let alone love and cherish' (Cornwall 2000: 18-19). One might indeed conclude that in this early marriage narrative, the character and personality of the groom is irrelevant. The young age of the bride in itself is what marks an early marriage as undesired and problematic, regardless of the husband.

There is a clear divergence between how organizations include men in their narrative and local discourses on the topic. The men that are missing in the development narrative are one of the central elements in how interlocutors decided on and judged marriages. Men were sometimes indeed discussed by interlocutors as oppressive figures: stories of abusive husbands or despotic fathers abounded. On the other hand, relations of love and care also emerged in marriage discourses in Wihdat. The character of the groom and the (expectation of) *tafahom*—mutual understanding—between the couple were often the decisive elements in deciding upon a marriage (see Chapter Two). Age played a role in these decisions, but so did other elements of the groom's character and family background.

One point of discussion among interlocutors was the impact of a large age gap on the existence of *tafahom* between a couple. Opinions often differed depending on personal experiences. The diversity of opinions was exposed in moth-

ers' reflections on their daughters' marriages. For example, Imm Rasem told me that she was worried about Mina, who married her nineteen-year-old cousin, as he was unable to emotionally and financially take care of his wife and child and could not carry the responsibilities of a household. Her hot-tempered daughter Rand, however, was happy with a husband who was fourteen years her senior, as he was a calm and mature man who knew how to take good care of Rand. Imm Rasem's reflections echoed what Rand had told me as well: she had preferred to marry an older man, expecting him to be able to understand her better.

Rawiya was another Syrian woman whose two daughters married at the age of fifteen. Similar to Imm Rasem, one daughter married a man twice her age, while the other daughter married a man a few years older than herself. Rawiya had opposing views to Imm Rasem on the influence of age and the age gap on her daughters' happiness. Rawiya herself got married at the age of fourteen to a man of twenty-eight. She explained how her husband had always supported her and strengthened her personality, turning her into a strong independent woman. She had hoped that her daughter's older husband would do the same for her. She noticed, however, that the wide age gap led to a lack of *tafahom*. While her young daughter was still enjoying make-up and going on trips, her husband was too serious and did not understand his wife. Her second daughter, on the other hand, was very happy in her marriage, as they were very much in love and in agreement with each other, partly because they were close in age and life-stage.

Some of my interlocutors, similar to the development narrative, believed that the young age of the bride was problematic in and of itself, regardless of who the groom was. While sitting in the middle of a conversation at a local women's centre, women were discussing the desirability of early marriages. Layla explained the difficulties she had faced when she married at the age of seventeen, especially with giving birth and household chores. When I asked her what age she thought was suitable to get married, she replied that twenty or twenty-one was a good age. Many grooms came to ask for her daughter's hand, but 'I did not allow her to get engaged until she turned twenty-one. I learned from my own experience and I did not want her to marry before then. When I was twenty-one, I already had three children.'

Listening to the conversation was a young woman who had come with her two little children. She told us she was twenty years old and got married at the age of sixteen. Layla asked her if, after her own experience marrying so young, she would allow her daughter to marry so young as well. The young woman answered with a smile 'if *ibn el- ħalal* comes, why not?'<sup>75</sup> Layla shook her head in disagree-

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75 *Ibn el- ħalal* in Arabic usually refers to a good person from a good family.

ment and said that the problem was that ‘when you marry at her age, or my age, she is a child and takes care of a child. Marriage is about responsibilities.’

Some women deemed young brides incapable of carrying the responsibilities of a marriage and too young for pregnancies. Others put more importance on the character of the man, and considered *tafahom* as linked to—but sometimes overriding the importance of—marriage age. Young women and their families were more inclined to accept a marriage proposal if they were satisfied that the man had a good character and family background, and was financially stable. The lack of responsibility of the husband was often mentioned as the real problem in (early) marriages.

Steering away from culturalist explanations allows us to see the diversity in opinions and experiences regarding marriage and age, and to identify those elements that are missing in the development narrative but are essential to interlocutors. Age and spousal age gap were discussed as affecting the *tafahom* between the couple and the ability to carry the responsibilities of a marriage—but so were other characteristics of the bride and groom that are completely absent in the development narrative.

## LABIBA’S ENGAGEMENT

The stories of Imm Rasem and her family can be told in a variety of ways. Development discourses might have highlighted the early age of the daughters when they got married, the regret of the mother, her confession that she allowed the marriages to take place because of the difficult economic situation in displacement, the daughters’ lack of education and the pain they endured during childbirth. I similarly started with Imm Rasem’s limited narration of events, and subsequently added details gleaned from conversations with her daughters to gain more context.

The case of Imm Rasem’s third daughter, Labiba, shows that even when specific stories align with the development narrative, vulnerability is not all-encompassing and coexists with agency. Labiba’s situation appears similar to that of Reem, the girl featured in the Save the Children report. Prevented from going to school by her uncles, she stayed at home, and subsequently got engaged a few months later at the age of fourteen. By contextualizing her engagement, and taking her words and reflections seriously, her case adds nuance to, and complicates, the development narrative in early marriage.

Imm Rasem moved to Wihdat in 2012 together with several relatives and their families. When I met Imm Rasem four years later she stressed that she would not allow her youngest daughter Labiba to get married before the age of eighteen. During my visit in 2018, to my surprise Imm Rasem informed me that Labiba was

engaged. When I asked how that happened, Imm Rasem first simply stated with half a smile on her face: '*zorouf*'—circumstances. She then explained that Labiba was supposed to start going to a new school for the seventh grade, but this school was far away and she was assigned to the evening shift, meaning that she would have to walk back home alone in the dark. Her uncles refused to let her do that and made her quit school. Several months later a man proposed to her and Labiba accepted.

Imm Rasem and I walked through the streets of Wihdat towards her house where we found Labiba in one of the rooms talking in a low voice on the phone. She was talking to her fiancé Ali. Imm Rasem joked with me saying: 'you should ask her, who does she love more, her fiancé or her mother?!' I later got the chance to talk with Labiba, now fourteen and a half years old. She told me that a cousin of hers was married to Ali's brother. She used to go visit her cousin, and this was how Ali and she met. When he learned that she quit school, he sent his stepmother to ask for her hand in marriage. Ali was the son of a Syrian father and a Palestinian mother. They lived in a neighbourhood close to Wihdat, where Ali worked on a vegetable truck with his brothers.

Labiba expressed her love for and fondness of Ali. She also said that if she was still allowed to go to school, she would never have agreed to marriage at such a young age, and neither would Ali have proposed to her. She had lost two years of school due to the war and enjoyed school in Amman a lot. Amongst her sisters, she was the only one who had many Palestinian friends whom she had met through school. She regarded Wihdat as her home as she was familiar with its streets walking back and forth to school. The fact that her older sister Rand was going back to her studies in the UK, after marriage and having two children, gave Labiba hope that she could always return to her studies later in life. Right now, however, she was busy learning how to cook, as she was getting married within half a year.

For Labiba, going to school was important in and of itself. Not necessarily in order to pursue higher education or a specific career, but to leave the house, see her friends, and enjoy a social life. Her story shows that indeed there are cases of girls prevented from going to school because (male) relatives fear for the young girls walking in unknown streets on their own. Labiba, however, did not consider Ali to have been forced on her. They had developed a liking for each other before their engagement, and spent hours on the phone during the engagement period. Labiba also talked about how Ali visited every Thursday and took her and her family out to nice places in Amman.

Having lost her father, Labiba's uncles had a say over her whereabouts. These gendered relations limited Labiba and played an important role, as the uncles decided on behalf of Imm Rasem that Labiba could not continue attending school.

Labiba lamented that, but she was simultaneously happy with her engagement to Ali. Her mother supported her daughter's decision to get engaged, even though she had preferred otherwise, and was happy that her daughter was so fond of her fiancé. In these various social relations, with her uncles, with her mother, and with Ali, Labiba was both vulnerable and agentic; limited and empowered; impacted by displacement and gendered limitations, and by affection and love. As such, vulnerability emerges as an ambiguous experience that manifests itself in diverse and ambivalent ways, and is not a totalizing condition that leaves young girls without agency.

## GENDER, VULNERABILITY, AND THE POLITICAL

When I met Imm Rasem for the first time in 2016, she was worried about her seventeen-year-old son Rasem. As the oldest male in the family, he carried a lot of responsibility in providing for his widowed mother and siblings. He found physically arduous, underpaid work at the Wihdat market, but was arrested twice by the police for working illegally. The last time Imm Rasem went to pick him up from the police station she was threatened that if Rasem was caught a third time, he would be sent back to Syria or imprisoned.

With no legal work permit, and having quit school already several years before, Rasem spent most of his days alone at home or with his relatives. Two years after our initial meeting, Imm Rasem texted me that Rasem was planning to go back to Syria as he was discontented with living in Jordan with no prospects. This was very difficult for Imm Rasem, who had already lost her husband due to the war (and a son in a car accident several years earlier). Moreover, as Rasem's uncles tried to convince him, he was now of military age, and if caught by the Syrian army he would have to be conscripted or face arrest. The humanitarian situation was also not much better. Eventually, the family convinced him to stay in Amman. During my visit in 2018, Imm Rasem had just found a job for her son at a garment factory. Rasem spent five days in a row working and sleeping there, and came back home at the weekends. Even though the work was difficult, Imm Rasem was happy he at least got out of the house and was earning an income.

The narrative of the various organizations produces refugee girls as inherently vulnerable. This gendered narrative ignores how vulnerability emerges 'as part of social relations', and is politically produced by the operation of power (Butler et. al. 2016: 4-5). Instead of equating women with vulnerability, which in turn translates into victimhood and passivity, vulnerability ought to be considered a 'fundamental unavoidable dimension of the human condition' (Gilson 2016: 78).



This allows for investigating the diverse ways in which both men and women can be vulnerable.

Women might indeed be more vulnerable to sexualized forms of harassment and exploitation, and gendered forms of oppression. The risk in equating female-ness with vulnerability and male-ness with oppression, reinforcing the 'women as victim, men as problem' discourse (Cornwall 2000: 21), is the depoliticization of vulnerability and the implied need for paternalistic protection of those deemed vulnerable (Butler et. al. 2016: 2).

Syrian refugee men also found themselves in vulnerable positions. Having faced war and trauma, and often having fled direct involvement in the armed conflict, they found themselves in Jordan, often with oppressive and harsh labour conditions, if they were able to find any work at all in the illegal labour market. They were frequently threatened by police with arrest and refoulement (L. Turner 2016). The fact that humanitarian and development discourses automatically consider women and children the most vulnerable has far-reaching impacts. For example, single Syrian men were often excluded from resettlement programmes to the UK. This process was eased if these men could prove themselves to be vulnerable, which they were considered to be only if they were victims of torture or identified as non-heterosexual (L. Turner 2017).

Shifting the attention away from vulnerability as a fixed characteristic of specific groups and individuals, to a vulnerability that emerges out of complex political and social conditions, allows for investigating the larger structural factors that impact life in displacement, and how they in turn influence marriage practices among refugees. To this theme, I turn in the following section.

## Foregrounding the structural

The framing of an issue as a certain problem influences which interventions can be thought of as a solution. The development narrative discusses the impact of structural elements—primarily poverty and displacement—on early marriages. However, their focus on cultural explanations and vulnerability as a fixed property of particular categories translates to a limited engagement with these large structures, with interventions focusing on awareness campaigns and small-scale depoliticizing projects.

An alternative understanding of vulnerability—one that acknowledges its ambiguous, diverse manifestations—shows how women and men navigate the precarious conditions they find themselves in. By understanding precarity as the

‘politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks’ exposing them to ‘injury, violence, and death’ (Butler 2009: 25), I do not argue that Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Jordan are not vulnerable. However, it is important to understand how precarity in displacement in the specific Jordanian and international context is experienced, and how it impacts people in a variety of ways.

In this section, I argue that a different, more contextualized analysis of marriage practices in displacement—one that pays close attention to political and economic precarity—disrupts the development narrative on early marriage. I demonstrate that the interventions and policies proposed by development organizations are limited and often miss the point. I show this by discussing the precarious legal status that results from displacement, and its impact on marriage practices and the lives of refugees more broadly. I then show that while the development narrative focuses on education as the main remedy for early marriages, interventions that are proposed miss the main concerns of interlocutors. By promoting policies that focus on small-scale interventions and awareness campaigns, the development narrative depoliticizes refugees’ plight and shifts attention away from power imbalances and politically induced conditions of precarity. Thus, the development narrative also has practical consequences for policymaking.

## DISPLACEMENT AND LEGAL STATUS

The development narrative focuses on the direct impact of displacement on marriage practices, mainly the sense of insecurity and dire economic conditions. These conditions were experienced by Syrian refugees who had been displaced due to a war that was in its third year at the time of the two reports’ publication (and in its sixth year at the time of my research). When discussing the impact of displacement on Syrian refugee families, UNICEF for example states that ‘experiences of armed conflict and displacement were reportedly generating additional incentives for early marriages’ (UNICEF 2014: 27). Marriages are explained as a means to protect against rape and harassment in refugee camps, in order to more easily gain entry into Jordan, as a means to secure sponsorship to be bailed out of Za’atari camp,<sup>76</sup> and to secure better future prospects for the child and her family (Ibid). The report mentions conflict and displacement, only to then relegate them to background information. Instead of seriously engaging with these structural

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76 The bail out system was in place until 2014. Syrian refugees could only leave the camp if a Jordanian national ‘bailed them out.’ See introduction.

conditions' role in marriages, the report accentuates families' *incentives* to an early marriage, presenting them as hoping to gain legally, socially or financially.

One element that is sporadically mentioned in the two reports as resulting from displacement and impacting marriage practices is the legal rights of refugees in their host country. In order to investigate the impact of legal status and legal rights on marriage practices, and the way they are included in the development narrative, I turn to Palestinian refugees. Legal residency and citizenship are a central concern of Palestinians in Jordan, and play an important role in marriage decisions, as the previous chapter has demonstrated. The lack of citizenship of Gazan Palestinians is a direct consequence of their double (and sometimes triple) displacement.

The UNICEF report also pays attention to the lack of citizenship among Gazan Palestinian residents (a consequence of their refugee predicament), and its impact on marriage. The study found that in Jerash camp, unofficially known as Gaza Camp as most residents are displaced from the Gaza Strip, there was a higher acceptance of early marriages (UNICEF 2014: 27). The explanation informs us that 'marriage to a Jordanian spouse also brings a girl Jordanian nationality, with greater rights and opportunities for her and, by extension, for her parents' family as well' (Ibid: 27). The report does not provide any detail on the impact of lacking a Jordanian nationality on refugees' lives, or how possessing it might help the bride or her family beyond the general statement that it provides 'greater rights and opportunities.' Instead of engaging with the legal predicament of stateless refugees, the explanation promotes the assumption that families are motivated to conclude early marriages because of some benefits they might receive, and do so on the expense of their daughters.

Amany, a Palestinian Gazan woman from Wihdat, agreed that the lack of citizenship might increase individuals' and families' willingness to accept an early marriage. By foregrounding the limitations she faced and analysing how the broader legal system in Jordan increased her precarity, her story shows that vulnerability emerges as part of larger socioeconomic and political conditions and the relational position of subjects within these conditions.

Amany's parents were both Gazans.<sup>77</sup> They lacked Jordanian (or any other) citizenship and transferred their foreign residency status to their children. Amany lived with her daughter and her Palestinian husband Morsi, a Jordanian citizen, in a small apartment in Wihdat, in the same neighbourhood in which she grew up in. Amany agreed that her precarious legal status might have made her more prone to accept a marriage proposal before she turned eighteen:

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77 Her parents, Imm Ayman and Abu Ayman, were discussed in Chapter Two.

For Palestinians that have a Jordanian passport, they study, work, and even if the girl is nothing special, they [the family] can put conditions. For example, they can ask for seven thousand [Jordanian Dinar] in *mahr*. She does not have to marry young because eventually she gets married. Not like us. We Gazans, we anyway cannot work so easily, and it is an opportunity if a Jordanian comes for you. If he does not come when you are young, will he come when you are older? So we are different from them. We marry earlier.

As she pointed out, the possession of legal papers and residency influences how families approach marriage candidates. Her mention of 'a Jordanian' refers to a marriage candidate that possesses Jordanian citizenship. Gazan Palestinians have more difficulty finding good and stable job opportunities because of the limitation of finding contracted work for foreign residents. Investment in education is difficult because of the lack of financial means, with no guarantee of finding a job afterward. Marriage thus emerges as one of the few future projects available for young men and women besides finishing high-school and working in the informal sector.

Full citizenship rights in Jordan can only be transferred through the father, so if Gazan women want to save their future children the hassle that comes with the lack of citizenship, a groom with Jordanian citizenship is considered highly desirable. A proposal from such a groom might induce families to accept even when they believe the bride to be too young. Jordanian women and rights activists have been leading a fierce campaign to allow Jordanian women married to non-Jordanian men to pass citizenship rights to their children. They argue against the patriarchal legal structure in which only Jordanian men have the right to pass citizenship to their spouses and children. The campaign achieved limited success after regulations were adopted in 2014 that allowed Jordanian women to pass limited civil rights on to their children. This, however, does not help women such as Amany, who themselves lack citizenship. There were sporadic campaigns led by Jordanian women and rights activists demanding more rights for Palestinian residents that lack Jordanian citizenship. But each time the issue is raised in parliament or in public discussions, the topic gets stifled, as it remains a sensitive topic in Jordanian-Palestinian relations.<sup>78</sup>

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78 Granting Jordanian citizenship to more Palestinians is a sensitive topic. As explained in the introduction, Jordanian officials argue that preventing Gazans from obtaining citizenship safeguards their right of return to Palestine. However, their right of return is not revoked when

International organizations' lobby for legal reform revolves mainly around the marital age clause. They refrain from campaigns addressing the legal status of Gazan Palestinians in Jordan, and the impact of this status on their lives. The legal status of Gazans is a long-standing political issue that has been debated for decades among Jordanian government actors and society at large. International organizations work at the invitation of the states' governments and refrain from upsetting the political status quo of the countries they operate in, and instead target policies and laws that are limited to those directly linked to marriage.

This precarious legal status was also shared by most Syrian interlocutors. As discussed in the previous chapter, Syrians were less engaged with questions of long-term legal residency in Jordan as they were in the first years of displacement and full of hope for a return to their homeland. However, as Rasem's case showed, the fact that Syrians were not allowed to legally work put them in precarious legal and economic situations. Syrians needed UNHCR papers to gain access to most aid provisions and to residency rights. Many Syrians had entered Jordan through unofficial channels and lacked the necessary documents. None of the recommendations of the two reports argue for a change in the legal position of Syrian refugees in Jordan, or a change in labour policies for refugees as part of tackling early marriages.<sup>79</sup> As such, even though the reports recognize the impact of legal and economic structures that put refugees in vulnerable positions, their focus lies on how these conditions incentivize parents to marry off their young daughters, instead of seriously engaging with these conditions as intervention areas.

## EDUCATION

The role of education in the development narrative confirms and strengthens the image of the victimized girl who is prevented from pursuing desirable future paths when forced into a marriage. As the previous sections showed, this reductive inclusion of education is problematic for two reasons. First, education cannot be detached from wider economic, political and social issues. The assumption that marriage is the only thing that stands between a girl and her education is flawed. Second, the narrative assumes that education is a universal aspiration of young

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obtaining other citizenships, and other Palestinian-Jordanians have maintained their refugee status while simultaneously being Jordanian citizens. For more on this debate see Perez (2011).

79 A report was published in 2015 by the Norwegian Refugee Council in cooperation with the International Human Rights Clinic that foregrounds the impact of a lack of documentation and identification papers on issues such as marriage and birth registrations. In addition to raising awareness, the report also calls for flexibility and a change in documentation regulations (NRC and IHRC 2015).

girls. These assumptions lead to a limited understanding of how refugee girls navigate the conditions they find themselves in and misses key areas for intervention, such as legal, political and educational reform.

Missing the opportunity of receiving an education is one of the main reasons development organizations deem an early marriage problematic. It is featured in the narratives as both a cause: girls out of school are more prone to an early marriage, and a consequence: married girls are often unable to complete their education.<sup>80</sup> For example, under the heading 'girls prevented from returning to school', Save the Children includes a quote by Reem, whose father was featured earlier in the report (and in the previous section of this chapter). The quote states:

Since I got married I don't feel anything. Well, I do feel sad when I see other girls from my neighbourhood going to school. Whenever I see a woman who has become a doctor or a lawyer or has finished her education I get upset (Save the Children 2014: 7).

Schools opened up for Syrian refugees in Jordan, but they soon became overcrowded and many children were left without a seat in school, or assigned to schools that were too far away and for which they could not afford transportation. The fact that higher education was very expensive for Syrians in Jordan, as they pay the fee of foreign students, precluded most Syrians from pursuing higher education in Jordan. This was made even more difficult for Syrians who lacked the necessary identity and residency documents. The report of Save the Children, however, does not question the likelihood of Reem being able to become a lawyer or doctor if she had not gotten married.

Lack of financial means to pursue higher education was one of the main explanations Palestinian interlocutors gave for not completing higher education.<sup>81</sup> In the case of Gazan Palestinians, the lack of citizenship and the limitations on employment opportunities also increased interlocutors' reluctance to invest in higher education. Amany's case indicates that education cannot be detached from legal residency rights and socioeconomic inequality. Amany was the second of seven

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80 Both Shehada (2008) and Moors (1995) show that marriage age decreases when educational opportunities are limited, such as due to the closing of schools during the Intifada in Palestine. However, the lack of educational opportunities is often linked to political and economic developments and infrastructures. Shehada argues that early marriage 'is subject to different variables, such as political circumstances, education, locality, refugee status, and participation in the labour market' (2008: 337).

81 This is true for Palestinian interlocutors who desired to continue their studies. Needless to say, many interlocutors did not invest in education because they were not big fans of studying.

daughters, and the first to get married. When I asked how come she married before her older sister, she answered that her sister was very keen on continuing her studies. Her parents had very limited financial resources, and the UNRWA helps one child per family pay tuition for higher education. Amany felt that her sister deserved the scholarship more than her. Even though Amany was very good at school, and passed her final high school exams, her sister was much more interested in studying. Amany did not consider her marriage as a sacrifice to her older sister. It was taken for granted that the child most keen on studying and with the best grades in school would be the one to use the scholarship.

Amany and Morsi got engaged when she was seventeen years old, and they married about a year later so that she could at least finish her high-school exams (*tawjihi*) before marriage. Her hopes for an education did not dissipate. However, now aged twenty-one and pregnant with her second child, they still had no financial means to pay for study, despite Morsi working full-time at a bank. She said she would need to pay not only tuition but also for daily transportation and books, which they were not able to afford. She was still hopeful that one day she would be able to continue her studies, even if just by taking courses at a local centre.

In Wihdat, completing the *tawjihi* was considered an achievement in and of itself. Passing the *tawjihi* was an important stage in boys' and girls' lives, often followed by a party. Parents and children alike preferred a marriage to take place after these exams, especially when the child was good at school. Possessing the high-school certificate enabled a woman to pursue an education at a later stage in life if she wished to do so.

When children disliked school, my interlocutors revealed that it was not that uncommon for girls and boys to quit before completing their high school education. Similar to Rand, Syrian and Palestinian children sometimes decided to quit school and they were not often met with resistance from their parents. Girls often took classes at various local centres, while boys tried to work in the informal sector. The development narrative promotes the assumption that education is a desire of all youth, and this assumption is nowhere questioned.

Education is considered *the* antidote for early marriages, and schooling is 'assumed to be the right of every individual and a primary means of enhancing material and social wellbeing' (Khoja-Moolji 2015: 46). Development organizations, therefore, focus in their interventions on raising awareness on the importance of education. Interlocutors, however, already have an awareness, albeit a different kind: their familiarity with and awareness of their particular context, and their experiential knowledge regarding the lack of opportunities for education and future

careers. The ideal chronological life cycle promoted by development organizations is thus detached from everyday lived realities.<sup>82</sup>

The development narrative disregards larger structures of inequality and dispossession. While the reports recognize the impact of precarious legal status on the lives of refugees, the recommendations section only calls for legal change in applying stricter legal regulations and preferably abolishing marriages under the age of eighteen. Lack of legal and labour rights for non-citizens are left undiscussed. Their educational intervention policies, in addition to raising awareness, are implemented on a local scale and vary: from giving families a monthly allowance as long as the children attend school, and covering transportation and other costs families might not be able or willing to pay—to increasing the available number of classrooms and teachers, and providing out-of-school education. While such local small-scale interventions could be helpful for girls such as Labiba if they had been available to her, their impact remains anecdotal and limited.<sup>83</sup> Factors such as the limitations of the general educational infrastructure and high tuition fees, and the lack of legal and labour rights for non-citizens, remain undiscussed.

## LIMITED INTERVENTIONS AND RAISING AWARENESS

This chapter has shown that development organizations frame early marriages among refugees as a problem resulting from displacement and poverty combined with cultural norms, which have a negative impact on the brides' health and education. Instead of engaging with structural elements as intervention sites, they are relegated to context, and the focus is put on the presumed lack of awareness of refugee communities as the main site for intervention. This is most visible in the recommendations section of the reports.

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82 Khooja-Moolji shows how this chronological development of a child into a sexually active adult through education and then work is a central feature in development and human rights discourses on early marriages (2015: 47-49).

83 On one occasion I was visiting a local organization and I met a group of Syrian mothers, whose children for the most part did not attend school because of the lack of seats in schools nearby. They had come to the organization seeking help in registering their children for school. The organization had several flyers with information and contact details of Jordanian and international organizations that worked on ensuring every Syrian child receives an education. The women, however, told me that they had already contacted all these organizations and were told over and over again that they could not be helped because of limited resources. The women complained that these organizations wrote one thing on their awareness flyers, while in actuality hardly did anything to help the Syrian refugees.



The majority of the recommendations focus on advocacy campaigns to raise public awareness. The 'awareness' that needs to be raised regards the negative impact of early marriages on education and health, the legal requirements of marriage in Jordan, the importance of education, and awareness of the services and support systems available for girls at risk of, or in, early marriages (UNICEF 2014: 33-34). Raising awareness as the main solution to early marriages locates most of the responsibility for change among the girls and their families.

Save the Children's report includes a quote that shows the importance of its work and how the organization can play a role in preventing the practice through raising awareness. A direct quote describes a Syrian mother with a disabled husband who had participated in an awareness-raising workshop. She had decided to get her daughter married to the neighbour's son, because she was afraid that in the absence of a physically capable father she could not protect her. After following the workshop, however, she changed her mind, as she learned about the dangers of early marriage. Now she says that her daughter 'won't get married unless a gentleman proposes to her, and when she's at least 22 years old' (Save the Children 2014: 9). The rhetoric of Save the Children is that only with its intervention will parents and children learn of the negative consequences of an early marriage and change their minds. In this narrative, young female victims can only escape local traditions and the violation of their rights by being empowered through the work of the organizations, and through a change in the beliefs and practices of the communities involved.

Poverty and education are two other areas of intervention that are accentuated in the recommendations of both reports. These recommendations vary from the very vague to the very specific, but they all refrain from discussing larger economic and political reform that might impact refugee marriage practices and lives more broadly. On poverty, the UNICEF report calls for further research into the link between early marriage and poverty. Without explaining concrete steps, it argues for the need to design programmes that will 'reduce the likelihood that families will feel the need to resort to child marriage as a response to socio-economic pressures' (2014: 34). As such, UNICEF does not directly call for interventions for the alleviation of poverty, but for ensuring that early marriage is not used as a remedy for such a situation. Save the Children, on the other hand, gives more concrete advice, as it suggests providing families with financial incentives, loans, or income-generating skills and education to combat the practice (Ibid: 9).<sup>84</sup> It rec-

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84 Save the Children, for example, suggests that by teaching girls income-generating skills, and having girls earn an income, they might be considered to have added value to their families,

ommends localized and small-scale interventions that alleviate financial pressures families face, and in turn prevent early marriages.

When it comes to education, Save the Children remains vague and simply states the importance of enhancing access to high-quality education, while the UNICEF report lists a limited number of direct action steps that can be taken to ensure girls will stay longer in the formal education system, such as improving transportation. It also calls for a system to help identify girls at risk of early marriage in schools, but no details are provided as to how this would be implemented. By paying limited attention to the complex ways issues such as legal status, educational infrastructures, poverty, and the traumas of displacement impact girls and their families, the proposed interventions depoliticize refugees' predicaments and instead promote projects that have limited effects.

## CONCLUSION: BEYOND A SIMPLIFIED NARRATIVE

The aim of this chapter was to critically analyse the development narrative on early marriages among refugee communities. By analysing two reports—a study conducted by UNICEF, and a briefing by Save the Children—the chapter showed that this narrative promotes a reductive understanding of vulnerability as a fixed condition of young refugee girls, and men as perpetrators, in which victimhood emerges as a totalizing condition of weakness and passivity that is incompatible with any form of agency. By doing so it overlooks the ambiguous, differential and complex ways in which displacement might influence marriage practices and refugee lives more broadly.

In order to complicate this narrative, I presented the case of Imm Rasem's family: a Syrian family displaced to Jordan after facing bombardments and the loss of loved ones. The marriages of Imm Rasem's two daughters show that despite the harsh conditions they found themselves in, the young women saw themselves as active participants in their marriages. I also discussed the case of Amany, a Gazan Palestinian, to show that structural conditions such as legal rights and residency status have an immense impact on people's lives in marriages and beyond. While organizations acknowledge these precarious structural conditions and their impact on early marriage, they refrain from engaging with them or calling for structural changes.

The ethnographic cases of Imm Rasem and Amany's families show that the fate of women cannot be detached from that of men. The fact that most Syrian

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implying that a family would object to a marriage only if their daughter had an added economic value.

men and women were unable to legally find work—as was the case with Rasem—exposed whole families to challenging economic conditions. Instead of addressing the root problems of poverty such as lack of labour rights and statelessness, organizations work on the local micro scale in an attempt to prevent early marriages from becoming ‘negative coping mechanisms’ for poor families.

The reports published by the aforementioned organizations produce a specific narrative that informs policy and intervention projects. They turn attention away from international and national power dynamics and policy reform,<sup>85</sup> and put most of the responsibility on the families that are already facing many challenges. The narrative refrains from questioning the status quo and misses out on designing projects that could have a more meaningful impact, not only in preventing early marriages but in structurally addressing the precarious living conditions of refugees in Jordan.

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85 One could add that in order to counter structural and institutional obstacles that Syrians face, a change on an international scale is required, such as the way European and other countries deal with accepting (or not accepting) refugees into their borders. Instead, they pressure countries such as Jordan to deal with the challenges resulting from hosting a large number of refugees in order to ‘contain the problem’ and not upset the international status quo.

An alley in Wihdat Camp. Photo taken by author.

## Chapter Four



# Local Centres in Wihdat: Encounters, Sociabilities, and Marriage

# Local Centres in Wihdat: Encounters, Sociabilities, and Marriage

The previous chapter showed that international development organizations active in Jordan produce a reductive understanding of marriages in displacement. The documents they publish focus heavily on early marriages, which they present as negative coping mechanisms of refugee families. Based upon the documents' problematization of early marriages, development organizations propose projects that focus on awareness-raising and small-scale interventions that are often irrelevant to the daily lives and struggles of refugee families. This chapter focuses on these projects and the centres where they are implemented.

Centres in and around Wihdat host projects financed by international and Jordanian organizations aiming to eliminate early marriages. For example, UNRWA schools host plays on early marriage, and women's organizations hold lectures and workshops on their negative effects, as well as on women's and children's rights more broadly. Various organizations and local centres cooperate together in the design and implementation of these projects. For instance, an organization such as Save the Children will design a project on a national level and seek local partners to be in charge of implementing it on the ground. While some organizations' central role is that of donor organization, other organizations work more closely with local partners in training staff and management, and develop intervention projects together. These projects are often implemented at local centres that host them.

The impact of these projects might diverge from the intended project's objectives in what De Sardan has called processes of sidetracking (2005). This happens as people selectively appropriate a project, its resources and its meanings in ways that are at odds with the desired effects of a specific development policy (De Sardan 2005: 145). The focus of this chapter is on the sidetracking processes of projects that are implemented at local centres in and around Wihdat. I examine two types of sidetracking and investigate the unintended consequences and side-effects of the work of organizations.

In the first case, employees and activists that provide the workshops and lectures to local residents play a central role. They adapt, choose, and change the content of projects according to local contexts and assumptions they hold about the projects' targeted beneficiaries. The implementation of projects is impacted by the translation of transnational discourses that travel between international (donor) organizations, the implementing organization, and the specific centres that host the projects for neighbourhood residents. As a result, the content of workshops reaches residents in ways unintended in the project design. I explore an instance of this kind of sidetracking by bringing in the example of Kahlida—a volunteer at a local development organization—and her work on gender, marriage and domestic abuse.

Another process of sidetracking seen in Wihdat is the result of the spatial impact of local centres. By bringing women together to follow a project, local centres facilitate new forms of female sociability and play an important role in local marriage practices in ways unintended by the organizations. Local centres facilitate diverse social encounters as they cater to different women through their projects. They add to the existing spaces and networks through which Wihdat residents can find a spouse, such as the family, the neighbourhood, or during wedding parties. In addition, employees and directors who meet many young women through the projects are considered socially well-connected and knowledgeable about the reputation and character of female participants and their families, and are thus approached for help in marriage pursuits. Local centres become specific spaces that create socially sanctioned female encounter zones and extend the social networks available to Syrian and Palestinian Wihdat women. These places and the forms of sociability they promote facilitate matchmaking efforts, and become part of local marriage practices.

These two processes of sidetracking show the importance of investigating the impact of the work of development organizations beyond their official discourses and policies. While the aim of projects might be to eliminate practices such as early marriage, or to raise awareness around gender-based violence and women's rights, there are other, unintended, consequences to their work. Employees of organizations and residents targeted by them actively appropriate projects and the spaces these organizations provide in ways that diverge from the projects' objectives. They are influenced by local social and economic inequalities, and become embedded in local practices such as marriage.

## Sidetracking processes of organizations: explaining gender-based violence

Development organizations design intervention projects and policies that are implemented through the cooperation of a variety of actors. One form of sidetracking in the work of organizations in and around Wihdat is the result of projects going through different organizations and actors, and the diverse interpretations they attach to development and rights-based work. While visiting a workshop at *River of Faith*, an Islamic centre for the widowed and poor, I witnessed how a project on gender-based violence reached the attending women in ways that diverged from the intended project design.

Funded by the European Union, the project was implemented through another organization based in East-Amman called *Verity Centre for Development*. The workshop on that day was given by Khalida, a volunteer at *Verity Centre*. It was a busy morning with about thirty women cramped into a small space. Khalida's colleague Shadia started the session by asking the women what kinds of violence existed and whether any women present had experienced violence. She used the word '*onf*' in Arabic, which could refer to both *violence* and *abuse*.<sup>86</sup> After discussing the case of a woman who responded that she was regularly beaten and screamed at by her husband, and an elderly woman who said she was neglected by her twelve children and was left all alone at home most of her days, Khalida asked whether men could be abused as well. When one woman answered that men could be abused at their work, Khalida asked the women to focus on the house. There was one form of '*onf*' of which all women were guilty of without them being aware of it, she said. I jokingly answered, 'not cooking for him when he wants to eat,' to which Khalida nodded in agreement and said: 'neglect! We are all guilty of neglecting our husbands.'

I could not hold my tongue and answered (quite hot-headedly) that women here had so many responsibilities: in addition to sometimes holding a job outside of the house, they were also in charge of the household and children, while husbands came home from work and sat down for the rest of the evening. Khalida replied by saying that she personally got home on most days before her husband and found enough time to cook and take care of herself before her husband came

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86 In human rights discourse the Arabic word '*onf*' is used as a translation for both violence and abuse. The translation of *gender-based violence* often used is *al-'onf almabni 'ala elnaw' al'ijtima'i*. To say someone is *abused*, the word *mo'annaf* is usually used, which comes from the same root as '*onf*'.



home from work. She then started asking random women in the room how much time they spent on Facebook. When women replied that they did not really spend much time online, she asked: 'so how much time do you spend talking with your sister on the phone, especially when you are gossiping?'

Khalida continued by explaining that working husbands meet good-looking women outside of the house, who all put on perfume and take care of themselves. He returns home to find his wife smelling like food and complaining about everything. Of course he will start looking for other women outside of the house. The women were listening and nodding in agreement. 'Men come home from work and we start nagging and complaining. Let the man rest!' She gave a personal example of her brother, who worked as an on-site architect and spent long hours outside in the sun. On arrival home, he would first check on his mother who lived downstairs and drink a cup of coffee before going up to his house. As soon as his wife heard him arrive, she would start yelling his name from the top of the stairs, 'Aymaaaan, your son did this and that.' The family knew that as soon as he went up, he would beat his wife. Khalida and her mother advised the wife to let him drink his coffee, have his dinner, and then start complaining, but the wife never listened. Khalida told this story as a funny anecdote, and laughed when she recounted how she and her mother would wait to hear Ayman beating his wife. Some women smiled along. Khalida recapped by saying that neglecting the husband was a form of *'onf*, and that we had to reflect on ourselves as we—women—were often to blame. Especially with the birth of the first child, women became too busy with their child and stopped taking care of themselves and their husbands.

The session of the day was about gender-based violence and domestic abuse. Khalida decided to use examples from her own life to explain these concepts to the women at the workshop. In addition to the story of her brother, she explained the session's concepts within a context she assumed was familiar to women's daily reality: housewives who were busy with cleaning and child-rearing married to hard-working husbands who did not spend much time at home. Khalida is what Merry (2006) calls an intermediary: an actor who translates human rights discourses into the vernacular. According to Merry, these intermediaries are familiar with both the language of transnational human rights and with local contexts and situations. She argues that they translate up to international organizations and donors, and translate down in their implementation of projects with beneficiaries. In this case Khalida was mainly involved in translating the EU's project down to the local women of East-Amman.

The gender-based violence programme funded by the EU was designed according to a wider trend I witnessed in Jordan in which international organizations invest in training local community actors to further implement their projects on

the ground. *Verity Centre* had submitted a proposal to the EU, which they had written together with a Palestinian-Jordanian lawyer active in women's and rights' organizations. The lawyer trained twenty volunteers for a period of forty days on international conventions, UN treatises, Jordanian laws and Islamic sources.<sup>87</sup> After the training period, the ten most committed women were chosen as 'liaison officers,' who in turn would initiate contact with women and centres in the community to organize thirteen sessions on topics around women's rights and gender-based violence. These sessions took place inside the homes of residents and at local centres such as *River of Faith*, and revolved around a collection of themes, namely: gender, civil and criminal law; domestic and social abuse/violence; marriage stipulations; early marriage; divorce and maintenance; inheritance; sexual harassment; Article 308 (the 'rape law'); human trafficking; and CEDAW.<sup>88</sup>

During an ensuing visit at *Verity Centre*, I asked Khalida more about the session she had held. I told her that I objected to how she explained women's role in men's abuse, and how she eventually blamed the women for the abuse they were exposed to. We started an interesting conversation that clarified how Khalida's approach to her sessions and the women attendees was strongly influenced by her personal life experiences and by the ideas she held on the women of East Amman. Khalida said: 'Let's be realistic. Most women here, when they get their first baby, then the second, they are only busy with the house. All their time goes to their children. When the husband comes it is his right to come home and see something nice.'

When I agreed that women could be more understanding towards their husbands, but that my problem was equating that to abuse, and that she in essence blamed women for having their husbands abuse them, she responded: 'I tell you why I put the blame on her. When I come tell you your husband is tired today, don't talk to him, and you are stubborn and don't listen. We are against violence, but who brought it on herself? ...With my brother, I knew his hands were tall [he hits], and that she provoked him. I also of course blame my brother. I would tell him, but not in front of his wife... But she did not listen to advice. When we told her to wait, and be quiet, she did not wait for a suitable time. This is the main problem.'

This exchange revealed that Khalida had specific assumptions about *women here*, who supposedly gave birth to one child after the other and were consumed by household chores. She was not referring to highly-educated women, or professionals who held jobs—but to house-bound housewives, such as many of the lower-class women of Wihdat and the neighbouring areas that participated in the project sessions. While Merry argues that intermediaries understand the language of

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87 As communicated to me in an interview with the lawyer who designed the training manual.

88 The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.

both global rights discourses and local contexts, she fails to account for the fact that the way actors interpret and understand both depends on their own views, and on their social and economic positions. Khalida for example grew up in Ashrafiyya in a lower middle-class family. She had been married for over a decade and described her marriage as a strong and respectful relationship. She and her husband were unable to have children, which according to her also brought them closer together (and made her one of those women who did not neglect her husband because of children). Khalida did not consider herself similar to the other women of East Amman. Even though she grew up in the same area, and the class difference between her and the women who participated in her workshop was not huge, she was able to work as a volunteer outside of the house, and prided herself on having a friendly, companionate marriage. While Khalida seemed to aspire to a higher class position, her image of neighbourhood women consisted of poor women cooking and cleaning all day in dirty clothes and continuously complaining to their husbands about their children. In short, her reading relied on class-based stereotypes.

The way Khalida provided the workshop on gender-based violence was influenced on the one hand by the training she received as part of the EU-funded project, and on the other hand by her own understanding and interpretation of abuse and neglect among the women she trained. Positionality, background and class differences impact the interpretation and therefore the vernacularization of rights discourses.<sup>89</sup> My own reaction to Khalida's workshop and different interpretation of women's abuse similarly stemmed from my specific background, having worked for years in human-rights organizations and familiar with discourses on gender through my university education. This has exposed me to different a understanding of, and experiences with, gender and women's abuse. Merry recognizes that 'translation takes place within fields of unequal power' and is influenced by gender, ethnicity and social commitments (2006: 40), but she does not recognize the heterogeneity of the local. Instead, she argues that the form of vernacularization is mainly influenced by the 'positioning' of the translator in relation to their distance from both the source of transnational rights discourses, and their distance from the target: the local communities (Ibid: 48). She locates vernacularization on a continuum between replication (when the actor is closer to the source) and hybridity (when the actor is closer to the target) (Ibid: 44).

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89 Of course, one cannot ignore the fact that Khalida's comments are aligned with wider patriarchal discourses. The inequalities I refer to here are not simply between Khalida and her lower-class beneficiaries, but she also replicates patriarchal and gendered power dynamics, according to which women are blamed for their own abuse for not being good-enough wives.

My fieldwork material shows that local socioeconomic inequalities and the heterogeneity of the local play a role in these acts of translation beyond the binary understanding of an actor's position between the 'source' and the 'target.' Khalida, an East-Amman resident herself, was trained as a volunteer to further disseminate her knowledge and awareness on gender-based violence to the women of the neighbourhoods of East-Amman. According to Merry's typology, Khalida's workshop would be considered a hybridity as it was infused with references and examples from the local context to bring the notion of domestic abuse closer to women's lived reality. However, instead of this hybridity stemming from Khalida's closeness in positionality or commitment to the local women of the centre, it stemmed from her self-definition *against* these women, their lower socioeconomic class, and their marital relationships. The dynamics at work in Khalida's act of translation get lost in Merry's typology, and fall out of its view. Yet it is precisely the heterogeneity of the local—in this instance socioeconomic differences—that drove the vernacularization of the project and ultimately its sidetracking. The implementation of development projects can be, and often are, influenced by local inequalities, class differences, and assumptions 'local' people hold of each other.

The sidetracking of the project—the discrepancies between policy and implementation—lay in the way Khalida explained gender-based violence. The EU's definition of this term and their intentions in funding projects such as the one that took place at *River of Faith* seem to diverge from what had happened at the local centre that day. The EU refers to its commitment to fight against gender-based violence in several key documents. As their website states, gender equality is 'one of the Fundamental Values of the EU' (European External Action Service 2018). It pays attention to gender-based violence in humanitarian responses, in addition to projects with cooperating countries as part of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. One of the EU's main interventions is capacity building among local actors with the aim to disseminate 'good practice' and lead to sustainable change (European Commission 2013: 14). Practices that the EU lists as falling under gender-based violence (in addition to sexual violence and rape) are domestic violence; harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and honour crimes; as well as socioeconomic violence (Ibid: 15).

Khalida's aim in her session was to introduce to the women of East Amman the concept of domestic violence, and to discuss the wider field of women's and gender rights. She believed that the examples she used reflected the personal experiences and daily realities of these women. They were, however, influenced to a large degree by assumptions and stereotypes she held about the women and their lives. These stereotypes and her own ideas of violence led the project in a very different direction than the focus of the EU. This demonstrates that while inter-

national and Jordanian organizations design projects intended to raise awareness, they often reach beneficiaries in ways that diverge from the envisioned purpose and content. Due to the various actors involved in the implementation of projects and their acts of translation, projects get sidetracked along the way.

The women that attended Khalida's session were beneficiaries of *River of Faith*, poor residents of the neighbourhood who also often received alms and charity. During their visits, they attended workshops given by various local and international organizations, not only *Verity Centre*, but also Save the Children and UNICEF. It was often the women that relied heavily on charity that were also mostly exposed to the work and discourses of development organizations. The fact that these women spent much of their time at different local centres and organizations also led to another process of sidetracking, to which I turn in the following sections. As a consequence of development efforts, centres such as *River of Faith* created an important space for female sociability and became embedded in the daily lives and routines of Wihdat residents. This had paradoxical consequences as organizations that aimed to 'develop' refugees and their marriage practices ended up providing a gendered space of sociability for women, which in turn facilitated marriage practices, some of which these organizations may not be in favor of.

## Wihdat centres as places of encounter and sociability

Many international and Jordanian organizations implement their projects at local centres in and around Wihdat. While some local centres organized their own activities, such as Palestinian village societies and Islamic organizations, many of them (also) served as locations that hosted projects of other organizations.<sup>90</sup> As a result, many centres combined aid provisions to the poor and the widowed with awareness workshops on health issues, women's rights, and Qur'an lessons.<sup>91</sup>

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90 Interlocutors often used the two terms, *markez* (centre) and *jam'iyya* (organization or association), interchangeably, except for Qur'an centres which were mainly referred to as centres.

91 Most centres would still define themselves as either a charity, human rights, or development organization, and some focused more heavily on one particular aspect.

*River of Faith* is a good example of the intersections and overlaps of the various forms of intervention. An Islamically inspired local charity centre,<sup>92</sup> *River of Faith* provides aid to what they define as the 'very poor' families of the area. The centre helps them with daily expenses and provides food packages. It also hosts Qur'an lessons given by volunteers, lectures on women's rights provided by Jordanian women organizations, health workshops by the Red Crescent, and children's events organized by Save the Children. A centre such as *River of Faith* thus brings together female recipients of charity, with women attending Qur'an lessons out of religious interests, and those participating in extra-curricular educational activities with their children.<sup>93</sup> Interlocutors' extent and form of interaction with local centres depended on their socioeconomic background and their social and political involvement in the camp. Women who attended for different reasons crossed paths, interacted and sometimes became friends. These forms of sociability and the networks the local centres provided women access to are another form of side-tracking of development work as they had consequences that reached far beyond the content of the projects.

Local centres attracted a variety of women, who attended the projects for different reasons. Zeina, a thirty-five-year-old Palestinian mother of five children, explained the importance of Wihdat's local centres to her. She was not able to complete her high-school education as a child, and married at the age of eighteen. After she gave birth to her fifth child, she felt bored at home and decided to learn a new skill. She took cosmetics classes at the *Wihdat Women's Centre*, and practiced at a local beauty salon. After the cosmetics course, she took a computer course, saying 'this was the first time I was learning something. The women at the centre are very nice. I saw different kinds of people and learned a lot.' Visiting the centre had an immense impact on her:

My personality changed completely. I used to be so naive [laughs]. When a girl learns, she changes. Her eyes are closed, but when she starts leaving the house here and there, she becomes more aware. It strengthens her personality, she learns

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92 *River of Faith* is located in Ashrafiyya, in close proximity to Wihdat, and caters to Wihdat residents and other neighbourhoods in the area.

93 The content of the projects contributes to the organizations' acceptance as socially sanctioned places because the projects they provide are not on controversial topics. Projects that include lectures on CEDAW, or that some might perceive as criticizing Islam, can be seen as provocative. As a result arguments erupted, cooperation between organizations got cancelled, or workshops were amended and changed.

how to speak, to leave the house on her own. I was strong and smart already, but I needed to mingle with people.

In Zeina's account, both learning new skills and interacting with new people strengthened her personality and had a positive influence on her. The classes at the women's centre put her in contact with women she would not have met if she had spent her days between her home and her children's schools. During these classes, women not only learned something new—such as computer or cosmetics skills—but also talked about life, got to know each other, and formed new friendships. As such, local centres provided women with connections and support networks outside of the familial circle and gaze.

Other Wihdat residents were financially dependent on organizations for charity and aid provisions. These women similarly spent time outside of the home, going from one centre to another, but out of need rather than want. Faliha was one such Wihdat resident who spent most of her days visiting various centres. A twenty-eight-year-old mother of two from Daraa in southwest Syria, Faliha lost her husband in 2012 when he joined the Free Army and was killed soon afterward by regime forces. She came to Jordan when the situation became too dangerous for her in Syria. After spending the first months in Za'atari camp, she was smuggled out by a Jordanian man who told her the best location for a widowed woman to live was East Amman, because of the availability of the *Zakat* and many other charity organizations.<sup>94</sup>

Faliha received *Zakat* money for herself and her two orphaned daughters.<sup>95</sup> This was her main source of income with which she paid for rent, water and electricity. Many local centres kept a list of widowed and poor women in the neighbourhood and called them when they received a big donation. These donations varied from clothes, to food packages, to envelopes with money. Faliha—similar to most Syrian residents I met—always kept a copy of her UNHCR card with her, and whenever she saw an organization or centre on the way she entered it to have her name registered on their list. Syrian women continuously exchanged information on organizations they encountered and which they expected might be able to provide charity or other relevant services.

The dependence of women like Faliha on the work of local centres was not always experienced positively. It also created stress and weariness, and demanded

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94 The *Zakat* refers to the official foundation that collects alms and distributes them to those in need, mainly widows and orphans. The *Zakat* in Wihdat provides aid to residents of Wihdat and other neighbourhoods in East Amman. Almsgiving is one of the pillars of Islam.

95 Orphans in Islam are children who have lost their father, and not necessarily both parents.

a lot of time and energy from widows and poor residents. For example, before the start of the new school year, I accompanied Faliha to a charity event at the local centre *River of Faith*, but which was organized by the international Islamic organization *Helping Hand for Relief and Development*.<sup>96</sup> *Helping Hand* was to distribute school-bags to orphaned Syrian children. Walking towards the centre we met many other Syrian widows on their way to the same event. Faliha knew most of them from other events and workshops. The women and their children were seated on plastic chairs in a cramped and hot room. The activity took over two hours, after which Faliha and her daughters were exhausted and went home to rest. Later, Faliha complained to me about being cramped for so long in a small space in the heat, but she was happy with the bags she received for her daughters.

Organizations targeted widows as a specific group of beneficiaries, together with what the *Zakat* and other charities termed the 'very poor'. Some organizations donated specifically to Syrian refugees, while others catered for residents of the area regardless of their national background. As such, local centres functioned as places of encounter that brought together Syrian and Palestinian women who lived in the same neighbourhoods, but did not often interact directly with each other. One of Faliha's closest friends was Raneen, a Palestinian widow she met at the *Zakat*. Raneen had three children and lived with her parents in Wihdat. Faliha and Raneen often took their children out for ice cream together, and helped each other out when in need. Most Syrian-Palestinian friendships I encountered in Wihdat were the result of the women attending the same centres and meeting each other repeatedly during workshops and projects.

The new forms of sociability these local centres facilitated also exposed social and political tensions, especially between the Palestinian and Syrian residents. Many Syrian families rented apartments in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan because of the cheaper rental costs and the availability of support networks. Syrian interlocutors expected Palestinians to be sympathetic to their cause. They often told me that Palestinians were supposed to know what it was like to lose one's homeland and live in exile. Palestinians indeed voiced sympathy and understanding, but they also blamed the Syrian newcomers for undesired developments such as the rise in the cost of rent. For instance, during a workshop at a local women's organization that was attended by Syrian and Palestinian women, arguments

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96 I term organizations as Islamic in cases when they explicitly state that their work is based on Islamic principles. *Helping Hand* for example states that its work is based on the principles illustrated in the Qur'an, and they implement their projects for the pleasure of God. Islamic foundations, however, are interconnected with other non-Islamic institutions and discourses (for more on Islam and civil society in Jordan see Harmsen 2008).



erupted when a Palestinian woman claimed that Syrian refugees were living in much better conditions than the Palestinians who had been refugees in Jordan for seven decades. In addition, Palestinian families that relied on aid expressed fear that all the projects were being directed to Syrians. One example of tensions resulting from a sense of competition was the previously mentioned school-bag event for Syrian widows and orphans at *River of Faith*. Palestinian women who usually attended the centre's other projects kept

coming into the director's office asking to receive schoolbags as well. The director had to explain multiple times that the event was not organized by *River of Faith*, but by *Helping Hand*, and that it was aimed at Syrians only. The women left the office complaining that the aid was only directed at Syrians, while the director rhetorically asked how she could explain to these women that it was impossible to always provide aid to everyone.

Despite these tensions, local centres remained one of the few places in Wihdat that provided these zones of encounter between women. The particularity of these centres' role in female sociability lay in the fact that they functioned as semi-public female places. They added to the limited public places women had access to in Wihdat. They remained legitimate places for them to frequent because most centres abided by local gender norms and behaviour. Projects were usually aimed specifically at women, and men were prohibited from entering these centres unless there was a good reason for their presence. The role of local centres in Wihdat recalls Kisch's notion of 'encounter zones' (2009: 724), in which Palestinian Bedouin and Israeli women share intimate space and daily routines at hospital maternity wards in Beer Sheva. These places were also significant for Bedouin women by allowing them to meet other Bedouin women from outside of their villages and kin-networks. Local centres in Wihdat became, like these wards, an unusual encounter zone: a public, urban space—yet a 'familiarized women's sphere' (Ibid: 735).

Another similarity with the work of Kisch is the fact that in both cases these encounters were an indirect effect of the women attending for other purposes. Women in Beer Sheva visited maternity wards with the aim of giving birth and visiting relatives, and women in Wihdat frequented centres to attend classes and receive aid. Yet in both cases, the place indirectly provided opportunities for women who would not have otherwise met, to meet. In Wihdat, local centres became central spaces of female sociability and encounters outside of kinship and neighbourhood networks that in their turn facilitated marriage matches.

## The relevance of space for finding a partner

Space is relevant to marriage in that it can facilitate or hinder certain forms of sociability upon which matchmaking is dependent. Sharing space may enable people to meet, or as Gieryn put it, 'places bring people together in bodily co-presence' (2000: 476). How, where and when places bring people together depends on the place's features, as places are gendered (Bondi 1998, Johnston 2015), imbued with values, and 'imbricated in moral judgements' (Gieryn 2000: 479).<sup>97</sup> Chapter Two has already described the impact of the normative and physical infrastructure of Wihdat on marriage practices. Because of the expected gender segregation and gender behaviour in the camp according to which (unrelated) men and women have limited direct interaction, female relatives of a prospective groom played an important role in matchmaking efforts.

Marriage matches in Wihdat were initiated in various places. Some places were particularly gendered spaces that allowed women access to prospective brides, and facilitated matches initiated by women searching for a bride for a male relative. Other places, more limited in Wihdat, were gender-mixed and allowed couples to meet directly. One location that allowed for both kinds of interaction was the (family) home. Many marriages in Wihdat involved relatives. The family provided marriage candidates with whom senior relatives could initiate a match. Men and women who were fond of a sibling, nephew or niece, hoped a marriage would ensue between them and their children. This venue for matchmaking did not necessarily depend on sharing a physical space, as relatives also facilitated a match with those living further away or whom they met only sporadically. The close family circle and homes of relatives played an important role for the younger generation of cousins however, as these spaces enabled them to meet directly during family visits and initiate a match themselves. Many of the love stories I encountered involved cousins who met during family visits, liked each other, and initiated a marriage proposal.

A specifically female space that facilitated encounters and marriage proposals among women was wedding halls. Wedding parties provided access to female

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97 Gieryn argues that there is a difference between space, 'detached from material forms and cultural interpretations', and place, 'filled up by people, practices, objects and representations' (465). Other scholars (see for example Ingold 2011), argue against this division and the existence of an abstract space. I similarly do not make an analytical distinction between space and place, and use them interchangeably.

circles beyond direct relatives and were a popular venue for women to find brides for their sons. Wedding parties in Wihdat were gender segregated, and women usually had their parties in closed-off halls. They would take off their headscarves, put on make-up and wear fancy clothes. It was not unusual for a mother attending with a daughter to be approached by another woman attending the wedding asking her whether they were interested in a marriage.

Beyond the family and wedding halls, female spaces available to women in Wihdat remained limited. Other Muslim-majority countries with similar expectations of gender behaviour have the practice of all-female visiting circles that expand female sociability and provide for opportunities of marriage matches to be made. In Yemen, women organize afternoon visits to each other's homes known as *tafrita*, and in the 1980s in the Palestinian city of Nablus, women similarly organized monthly receptions (*istiqbal*) (Moors 2005: 189, 202). Within these semi-public homosocial spheres, women discussed various topics including those related to marriages.

During fieldwork I did not encounter such visiting circles in Wihdat, of which the main purpose was for women to socialize with other women outside of their familial circles. What some women did, however, was walk around neighbourhoods and ask women they met whether they knew of any available bride. Here, the neighbourhood served as the place to meet prospective brides. This was how Amany and Morsi's match was made. Morsi's mother lived in a neighbourhood close to that of Amany's. While walking through the neighbourhood one day she saw a woman she knew fleetingly and shared the fact that she was looking for a bride for her son. The woman informed her that her upstairs neighbour had a number of daughters of suitable marriage age. The neighbour gave Morsi's mother the phone number of Amany's mother, and a first visit was agreed upon.

A less common place of encounter that facilitated marriage matches in a way that is in accordance with local norms, was provided by Islamic organizations in and around Amman. One such organization that had its poster hanging in the streets of Wihdat was *Tas-heel for the Facilitation of Marriages*. Located a twenty-minute drive from Wihdat, the director informed me they have Wihdat clients, even though I did not encounter any marriages initiated by such an organization. Interested people paid a small fee and filled out an application in which they listed what they were looking for in a spouse. Men that registered at *Tas-heel* varied from local men (often looking for a second wife), to Jordanian men in the diaspora who wanted to marry someone from the homeland but had no relatives in Jordan who could help them. The women who registered were usually either those considered 'spinsters', widows, or divorcées. Such matches, limited in Wihdat, were religiously sanctioned and bureaucratically formalized. They prevented physical encounters between men

and women except for the clear purpose of marriage. While culturally sanctioned, Islamic organizations' role in marriage matches deviated from local social practices in Wihdat in which women played a central role in the matchmaking.

Gender-mixed yet respectable places of encounter that could facilitate direct interaction between men and women were limited in Wihdat. Beyond the few projects for mixed youth that were provided at the local centres, and mixed political events, universities and colleges outside of Wihdat provided such a space for the younger generation to find each other. As Chapter Two explained, this usually involved the couple itself initiating the match, whilst cloaking it as a 'traditional marriage' to their social circle. Adely (2016: 109) and Nasser El-Dine (2018: 434) mention the possibility for couples in Amman to meet and date at shopping malls and coffee shops. While some Wihdat residents might indeed go to such places, the opportunities to go to such venues remained limited due to the control on women's mobility, and the not-so-cheap costs of transport and service at such coffee shops.<sup>98</sup>

The fact that there were limited options for young men and women to physically interact and initiate relationships in Wihdat did not increase the importance of online internet dating much, especially for Wihdat women. Aouragh discusses how online dating and romantic experiences offered an alternative to traditional matchmaking among Palestinians in the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon, facilitated by the blooming of internet cafes (2011: 223). In a similar vein, Costa shows how in a town in Turkey where gender-mixing was limited, young residents of Mardin used their smartphones to access social media, and to initiate and maintain premarital relations away from the gaze of their families (2016). During my fieldwork I did not encounter any internet cafes in Wihdat, which could be explained by the fact that internet access had been made easier in the last decade with the use of mobile phones and mobile internet. Unlike Costa's case, however, many of my interlocutors still had very limited access to online platforms as they struggled financially and were often unable to buy internet credit. I also did not encounter any places with Wi-Fi in Wihdat that could have provided them with online access. In addition, many women in possession of a smartphone and internet credit feared that their parents or siblings would check their phones and catch them talking to men. Some young women solved this by having a secret second phone that they took out at night. So, while a few women did end up in (virtual) relationships facilitated by online platforms and the use of mobile phones, these relationships remained highly limited and contested and thus usually kept secret.

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98 See Achilli (2018) on the participation in, and longing of, young Wihdati men for these neo-liberal consumption trends and venues that have been developing in Amman.

In Wihdat, encounters were facilitated by a variety of spaces. The form of these encounters depended on the way these spaces were gendered and how they fit into the broader normative landscape of Wihdat. Local centres that hosted projects of the various organizations added to the existing spaces that facilitated marriage matches: the familial home, the neighbourhood, wedding parties, and universities. Though certainly not intended by the international and Jordanian organizations that implemented their projects at local centres, these centres created semi-public female spaces that as an indirect and unintended consequence facilitated marriage matches.

## Local centres, sociabilities, and matchmaking

Local centres in Wihdat became a particularly gendered space that allowed for Palestinian and Syrian women to meet and interact in circles outside their families. They promoted socially acceptable forms of sociability that added to the (rather limited) possibilities for women to get acquainted. The new social networks women formed provided them with additional possibilities to find future spouses. Women who visited local centres asked around during workshops and lectures whether the other attendees knew of suitable brides. They helped and advised each other, and were introduced to marriage candidates that they would not have encountered otherwise. Conversely, some women approached local centres with the explicit aim of seeking a bride, as centres were known to attract young single women through their projects.

The following example illustrates the importance of these social networks in marriage discourses and practices. After a workshop at a local women's centre in Wihdat that was attended by both Syrian and Palestinian women, a group of Syrian women decided to go for lunch at the house of Hana, a Syrian widow who lived nearby. Some women knew each other very well, while others joined for the first time. The women sat on mattresses on the floor sharing a lunch of eggs and beans, and talked about Imm Hussein, the Syrian volunteer that worked at the women's centre. Imm Hussein made sure to call and invite the Syrian women listed on the centre's list whenever there was an event. This time she had called the women and told them to attend this workshop so they could make sure to register their name on the Ramadan list and receive Ramadan donations. This was the main reason most of these Syrian women had attended the workshop that day.

After a while the conversation turned to marriages. Imm Ali, a Syrian woman in her early forties, was worried about her two older children: Walaa, her twenty-four-year-old daughter; and her twenty-three-year-old son Ali. Both children had started their university education in Damascus but were unable to complete their studies now that they were in Jordan. Imm Ali wanted them to get married. She was concerned that while Walaa was getting older, she still rejected most of the marriage candidates that came to ask for her hand. Imm Ali shared that a Syrian man who worked at a gas station and earned a decent salary had come for a visit. Walaa rejected his marriage proposal because he was thirty-nine years old, an age Walaa deemed too old for her. Some women commented that an age difference of fifteen years was not that bad. Hana asked whether the man also looked that old, to which Imm Ali answered yes. When Imm Mahmoud said that Wala should agree nevertheless, Imm Ali frustratedly said that she cannot force her daughter into a marriage. While we were still sitting Imm Ali received a phone call from another interested family who wanted to come for a visit that evening to see Walaa. The women in the room were curious and asked Imm Ali about this new marriage candidate.

I met Imm Ali several times over the ensuing months, usually with other Syrian women present as well. In addition to her frustrations regarding her daughter, she often shared her irritation that she was unable to find a bride for her son. The women gave her advice, and asked her whether she already met so and so. At one point, she was led to a Syrian family in Wihdat through her contacts, but the two families did not agree on a match. Five months later she finally found a bride in Irbid through relatives of hers. Imm Ali invited her Syrian friends to join her in Irbid for the wedding party. She also hosted a small party at her home. Around twenty Syrian women came to Imm Ali's house, with some of them dancing to music in the middle of the room. Most of these women Imm Ali had met during events and workshops at local centres.

As Imm Ali's case shows, the new female networks women formed at local centres became an integral part of their support system. Imm Ali discussed her frustrations about her fruitless marriage pursuits on behalf of her children, and the women tried to help her by searching and advising her on marriage candidates and participating in the celebrations. While the women visited these centres in the hope of receiving aid, these locations indirectly became central venues to form new friendships and social networks that played an important role in marriage practices. This was especially the case for Syrian residents of Wihdat who lived far away from other relatives and had lost their existing social networks during the war and ensuing displacement.

In other instances, local centres had a more direct role in marriage matches, as women met possible candidates from among the other female attendees. Rahaf for example, discussed in Chapter Two, was approached for a marriage proposal by another woman who was attending the same centre. While at a weekly Qur'an lesson in Wihdat, an attendee asked Rahaf whether she could visit her at her home. Without any indication of the purpose of the visit, the woman visited Rahaf together with the Qur'an teacher, and sat down with her and her mother. During this visit, she made clear that she liked Rahaf a lot and was interested in her as a bride for her son. The woman did not visit the Qur'an centre with the purpose of searching for a bride, but while attending she met Rahaf and initiated contact. Rahaf and her mother-in-law only met because they went to the same local centre. Besides looking for a bride through the other available venues, through relatives and acquaintances, the local centre provided the mother access to an additional pool of prospective marriage candidates.

An even more direct role of local centres in marriage practices is when Wihdat residents approach a centre with the sole aim of asking about possible marriage candidates. At the end of a workshop for Syrian residents of Wihdat at a local women's centre, when most attendees had already left, a Palestinian woman in her seventies walked into the room, sat down, and looked around. She mentioned that she was looking for a bride for her son, and asked whether any good-looking women had attended the workshop. One young woman caught her eye, and when the older woman asked whether she was interested, the woman informed her that she was already married. Disappointed and without having found a suitable candidate, the woman left the centre.

Residents of Wihdat, men included, were aware of the fact that local centres were a venue to search for future spouses, and also utilized it as such. Zaid was one such man. A twenty-one-year-old college student from Wihdat, Zaid told me he wanted to find his future bride himself. If he saw a girl he liked, he would ask about her, find out where she lived, and then send his mother to her house. However, if he was unable to find a bride himself, he would either ask his mother to go to the local Qur'an centre, or stand outside of the centre himself and see if any nice girl walked out. Zaid stressed that he preferred to find a bride himself, meaning that he would search for a bride by looking around in his surroundings. Places to look for single women included local Qur'an and other women's centres.<sup>99</sup>

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99 It was usually unacceptable for a man to enter such a place with the purpose of searching for a bride, as that would most probably harm the centre's reputation. Therefore, as Zaid made clear here, men would either send in their female relatives, or hang around at a safe distance.

In sum, women appropriated the spaces these local centres provided them and used them to expand their female social networks by attending events and projects. These centres and the sociabilities they facilitated became an integral part of women's lives. Women who would not otherwise meet became friends, gave each other advice on marriage-related issues, and helped each other find marriage candidates for relatives. These social networks also directly provided access to available marriage candidates while attending the various projects. Beyond this, these local centres—especially those that catered to women—were known to attract unmarried women, and thus became locations actively sought out by both men and women in search of brides.

## Authority, respectability and social control

In one of the market streets of Wihdat is a tall building with the sign 'Wihdat Women's Centre.' The main entrance is an iron gate that opens to a yard, at the end of which the director's office lies. The director's desk is right in front of the office door, so she sees whoever enters and leaves. In addition to the director's office and the kitchen, the centre consists of a number of classrooms that are used for the various courses and workshops the centre provides. The classrooms are located on both sides of the director's office and are furnished sparsely with plastic chairs and wooden tables, in addition to equipment used in the classes such as sewing machines, beauty products, and blackboards.

The *Wihdat Women's Centre* provides courses to women and cooperates with various local and international organizations. One day it was tasked by a funding organization to invite female Syrian residents of Wihdat to a group discussion. The aim of the discussion was to learn about the financial obstacles Syrian women in Wihdat faced, and to find out how to best support them in generating an income. At the end of the session, the director of the centre, Suheir, approached a Syrian woman who had come to the discussion with her unmarried sixteen-year-old twin. Suheir asked the mother whether she was interested in having one of her daughters married, as she knew a Syrian man, 'someone from amongst your people,' who was searching for a Syrian bride. Without Suheir explicitly asking about the age of the daughters, such a match would go against the organization's opposition to early marriages. The mother replied that she was not interested as her daughters were too young to get married.

Suheir, a Palestinian-Jordanian woman, had been the director of the centre for six years. Even though she had never lived in Wihdat or the neighbouring areas,



she prided herself on having many social connections in the camp. As the director of a centre that provided courses to women, she was in a position to meet prospective brides and their mothers, and put them in contact with interested grooms and their mothers. Women and men approached her asking her for help in their marital pursuits. In this case, she had met a Syrian man at a shop whom she felt sorry for, as he had no female relatives in Jordan to help him seek a bride. He had therefore sought the help of Suheir.

Women and men who were unable to find a suitable marriage match themselves employed the help of directors and employees of local centres, because they were considered to have the social knowledge and necessary information on the people who attended. Directors and employees were central social actors in everyday interactions and were called upon to help, advise and act as intermediaries in marriage-related issues. As a result of the local nature of these centres and the close and daily interaction of employees such as Suheir with local residents, employees became figures of authority and knowledge. Their work provided them with the connections and social capital that they could deploy. This was similar to Palestinian UNRWA employees in the refugee camps in Jordan who provided their own refugee communities with services. These employees gained a 'local and native authority in matters of everyday life' because of their intense and direct interaction with the residents (Farah 2009b: 402). According to Suheir, she was approached in seeking marriage matches because people respected her and trusted her judgment, and they were aware that she knew many people in the area. She emphasized that she only helped 'respectable and good people,' to make sure she was actually helping and not causing unhappy marriages.

People counted on women such as Suheir in marriage matches, not only because of their access to social networks through the projects provided at the centres, but also because they were familiar with the reputation and character of local women. Since asking about the character of a marriage candidate was an important aspect of the marriage process, a woman's reputation at the centre played an important role in determining whether the mother of a groom decided to approach her. Based on the requirements of a groom's mother, Suheir would approach a woman she thought suitable and ask whether she was interested. If the woman had no objections, Suheir would take her mother's phone number and put the two mothers in touch. The Syrian man she had met insisted on marrying a Syrian woman, so when her centre hosted a workshop specifically for Syrian women, she hoped to find interest there.

Women in respected positions, such as the centre's director, were not only called upon to help in finding marriage matches, but also to play a role in marital disputes. People relied on Suheir's access and ability to talk to the young women

alone in her office. Husbands and fathers at times approached her and asked her to talk to a specific woman involved in a marriage dispute. Sometimes female attendees approached Suheir to interfere in a family argument, as men were also likely to listen to what she had to say. Suheir was proud that she was asked for advice and help, and considered it a good deed to bring a broken family back together, or to be responsible for a successful marriage match.

Beyond the direct role of people in positions of authority in marriage-matches, they were also important in maintaining the centres' reputation as socially acceptable places for women to frequent. The social reputation of a centre was crucial in order for it to remain an acceptable place for women without objection from relatives. Centres were therefore enmeshed in processes of social control and local power dynamics. One of Suheir's main concerns was indeed to maintain the centre's respectable reputation. To her, this manifested in making sure female attendees acted according to local social norms. She informed the employees of the centre to ensure that women attending a course were not allowed to leave in the middle of class or to meet someone outside of the gates. The families of these girls and women trusted her to watch out for them, she said, and she took that responsibility seriously.

Abeer, a twenty-four-year-old divorcée, had to leave one day in the middle of her sewing class to go to a doctor's appointment. Suheir prevented her from leaving until she called Abeer's mother and verified that she knew about Abeer's appointment. Another time Suheir saw a young woman attendee leave the classroom and walk towards the gate into the market. She followed and stopped her asking where she was going. When the woman responded that she needed to buy some material from the market to use in class, Suheir prevented her from leaving and sent her back in.

The women who attended the courses had mixed feelings about Suheir's strict policies. While some women thought her to be too strict—others said that some women, especially the younger ones, really needed to be closely monitored. The centre attracted women of different ages and marital statuses, including girls as young as fifteen who had quit school and wanted to learn a skill such as cosmetics or sewing. While most of the control was aimed at the younger girls, the director said that older (married) women also needed to be watched, as some of them might come to the centre to talk to their lovers on the phone while attending their classes.

One of the indicators of a centre's respectability was the extent to which it allowed for gender-mixing, and controlling who walked into the centres. While most centres were open to the general public, there was also a certain degree of control over who could enter and for which purposes. Similar to the *Wihdat Women's Centre*,

most centres I encountered in Wihdat had the director's or the secretary's office located right next to the entrance. This enabled the supervision of those entering and exiting at all times. Even though the entrances were never locked during daytime, it was unacceptable to be found wandering into the place without a clear purpose.<sup>100</sup> This made most local centres, and especially women's centres, function as a semi-public female space.

The occasional visit of a male accountant or government official was not that contested, as their interaction remained limited to the director and the employees of the organizations. Projects that brought male and female beneficiaries together, however, were more controversial. Gender-mixed youth projects were a case in point. The *Wihdat Women's Centre* served as a location for youth projects where both young men and women attended and shared classes. Even though Suheir supported these initiatives, and was a proponent of gender-mixing among youth as they needed to learn how to respectfully engage with each other, this also made it trickier for the centre to keep its reputable and proper gendered behaviour. Suheir solved this by insisting that these classes take place in the afternoon when most women employees and attendees had left the centre. She also made sure that the young men and women behaved in a socially acceptable manner, that they did not sit too close to each other, and that the doors of the rooms remained open.<sup>101</sup>

Political events that were open to all Wihdat residents, women and men, were more contested as respectable places for women to attend. For example, the Wihdat club held an event commemorating Palestinian Prisoner's day. Some of my politically active Palestinian interlocutors thought it important to attend. Others however noted that these events might attract troublemakers and unwanted behaviour by men, so it was better for women not to attend. Local centres that were for the most part considered female spaces, on the other hand, remained legitimate places for women to visit, and for residents to approach in their search for marriage candidates.

100 Unwanted visitors included people with a questionable reputation or purpose. As the *Wihdat Women's Centre* was located in the middle of the market, one of the concerns the director had was that women that came into the centre came there to hide after they had stolen wallets or phones from shoppers.

101 Of course such projects, which were rare in Wihdat, also provided men and women the opportunity to meet and interact, sometimes initiating a relationship or a marriage proposal.

## Conclusion: local centres' embeddedness in marriage practices

This chapter focused on sidetracking processes of the work of organizations, many of which have as their aim to change local marriage practices in specific ways. The first section focused on bringing together the different levels of organizations involved in implementing awareness-raising projects. It showed how transnational discourses on women's rights and gender-based violence reached residents of East-Amman through acts of translation and vernacularization. These acts of translation were influenced by local inequalities, class differences, and assumptions people held of each other. As a result, discrepancies occurred between the intended result of a project and the actual implementation of it on the ground.

Another unintended consequence stemmed from the spatial presence of local centres. Centres located in and around Wihdat whose employees interacted daily with their beneficiaries were embedded and integrated into local social practices and networks. Most projects on marriage-related issues, as discussed in the previous chapter, took the form of awareness-raising lectures and workshops. The central role of local centres was not a direct result of these projects but was rather implicit and unintended. They provided socially sanctioned female places of sociability and encounter which women also used in marriage pursuits.

The nature of the projects these organizations provide is important. First, since most projects were directed at women, local centres became an urban, semi-public women's sphere. These places were considered to abide by socially accepted behaviour and prevented unwanted gender-mixing, bestowing an air of respectability on them. Second, the variation within these projects, mixing humanitarian aid relief with development and rights-based projects, drew Wihdat women of different socioeconomic and national backgrounds. These encounter zones reflected and reproduced larger social and political tensions, but also provided for intimate encounters, relations and friendships.

Centres, functioning as encounter zones, gave women in search of a bride for a son or brother access to women from outside of their familial social networks. Employees of these centres became figures of authority and were often asked for advice and support in marriage pursuits. The role of women in initiating a match, and the importance of ensuring a candidate's reputation, were both facilitated by these centres. Syrian and Palestinian women were familiar with similar marriage process when it came to the matchmaking phase. Women attending a workshop were not surprised if one of them asked for a suitable bridal candidate, or if a woman walked in to ask around for a bride. Local centres did not form a con-

troversial place for matchmaking efforts, but rather expanded the space already available, providing access to new networks and social connections that could help in a match.



The kitchen of a Syrian family in Wihdat Camp. Photo taken by author.





## Chapter Five

# Marriage Aspirations in Displacement

# Marriage Aspirations in Displacement

Histories of displacement and positionalities in Jordan impact the marriage practices of Palestinian and Syrian Wihdat residents in multiple ways. As I demonstrated, processes of national identification, belonging, and citizenship rights impact the choice of partners—while the normative, legal, and social landscape of Wihdat and Jordan more broadly impact marriage processes such as matchmaking efforts, engagements, and marriage conclusions. International development organizations aim to impact marriage practices, specifically early marriages, but often miss their mark due to a limited view of the relation between displacement and marriage practices. The focus in their work and discourse remains on connecting displacement to undesirable forms of marriages. The ethnographic material, however, indicated that while Syrian and Palestinian families are vulnerable in the face of displacement and poverty, families—including the young brides themselves—show agentic abilities in navigating their precarious legal and economic conditions. Moreover, Wihdat residents appropriate and make use of the spaces available to them in the camp, such as the local centres women visit, in order to expand their social networks and seek marriage partners for their relatives.

This chapter argues that in order to understand marriage experiences of refugees, it is insufficient to look at the problematics of marriages in displacement. I bring to the fore an aspect of marriage that is ignored by development reports but is essential to refugees: that marriage emerges as a particular aspiration in displacement. Refugee families often pursue marriage in an attempt to regain a sense of intimacy and of feeling at home while in displacement. Marriage plays an important role in rebuilding new social networks, and is closely connected to refugees' visions of a good life and desirable futures. By looking at marriage as an aspiration, I show how refugees, on the one hand, reflect on and experience displacement, while on the other hand orient themselves towards their future.



Refugee-ness is supposed to be a temporary situation, culminating either in a return, or in a resettlement in the host country, or a third country. Palestinians, whose exile was a product of a settler-colonial project in Palestine, live in a protracted state of displacement. While they have not given up on their right to return to Palestine, they recognize that their near future is in Jordan. The future is of a more uncertain character for Syrian refugees in Jordan, who hope for an imminent return as soon as the situation will allow for it. In these uncertain conditions, Syrians' marriage aspirations and projects reveal refugees' 'mundane engagements with the future' (Kleist et. al. 2016: 380). Investigating marriage practices in the first years of exile sheds light on how they engage with both the uncertainty and the potentiality of the future in their daily lives.

This chapter will focus on ethnographic material that relates to Syrian refugees in Wihdat, as the shattering of previously existing social networks and attempts to create new affective bonds in displacement were mostly evident among my Syrian interlocutors. Syrian refugees, unlike the Palestinians, were at the time of fieldwork still directly dealing with the traumas of war and displacement. Their lives were also consumed by trying to adapt to their new situation in Jordan where they lived in a very precarious state, as the majority of Syrian Wihdat interlocutors relied heavily on humanitarian aid for survival, and faced difficulty in gaining access to work permits and jobs.

Palestinians also had specific marriage aspirations that stemmed from their prolonged history of displacement and their experiences in Jordan, but in a different way than for Syrians. Marriage to a spouse who possessed Jordanian citizenship was considered very desirable as it would enable the family to live a dignified life in Jordan. Additionally, marriages to fellow Palestinians were also desired as they strengthened the sense of belonging to Palestine and kept memories of Palestine alive, especially if the spouse was from the same ancestral village. I was unable to find academic literature on marriages among Palestinians in the first years of exile as a particular aspiration connected to a hope for return to Palestine, or as a way to rebuild social networks in displacement. Nevertheless, Palestinian current and past experiences remain relevant to understanding how displacement impacts marriage practices during various time periods of displacement, and I therefore include the Palestinian case at several points throughout this chapter as well, either to contrast to or to complement the Syrian case.

Writing about marriage as an aspiration, as a desirable path refugees work towards while living precarious and uncertain lives, can seem to draw attention away from the oppressive structures and violence refugees face on a daily basis. Ortner's emphasis on the importance of integrating both what she terms dark anthropology, that investigates power and inequality, with anthropology of the good

(2016), is especially relevant here. As the previous chapters have shown, refugees in Jordan are exposed to local, national, and international repressive power dynamics. Investigating how marriage is aspired to among displaced communities reveals important aspects around how refugees experience their displacement, and particularly the impact of displacement on their emotional and social state. It also reveals how refugees envision, hope for, and imagine their future amidst uncertain conditions.

## Displacement, concern and marriage

Yasmeen, a twenty-nine year old woman from Damascus, arrived in Jordan in 2013 with her husband Yousef and their three young children. When I met them three years later, Yasmeen and Yousef were in the final stages of being resettled to the United States of America. Yasmeen's twenty-three-year-old brother Hassan also lived with them in a rented apartment in East Amman. Hassan worked as a cook in a restaurant he had opened in the camp together with a cousin of his.<sup>102</sup> Aware that I met many Syrian families through my research, Yasmeen asked me if I knew of a Syrian bride for her brother. She explained that mothers and sisters were crucial in finding a good marriage match for their brother or son, as they knew what he was looking for and had his best interest in mind.<sup>103</sup> Their mother had remained in Syria. As soon as Yasmeen left for the United States it would become much more difficult for Hassan to find a bride. She therefore wanted to make sure that she at least got her brother engaged before moving abroad.

I suggested one woman I knew of, but according to Yasmeen she was a few years older than Hassan and thus not a suitable match. She was interested in this woman's younger sister, but the girl wanted to complete her education and the mother believed her daughter to be too young for marriage. So Yasmeen had found no luck with that family. A few days before the family's departure to the United States, I visited again, and Yasmeen expressed her worry over Hassan. Hassan usually went to work and afterwards often visited relatives and friends. But it was

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102 Hassan and Yasmeen had Palestinian-Jordanian cousins, as one of their Syrian aunts had married a Wihdat resident two decades earlier. The cousin, who possessed Jordanian citizenship, was able to open the restaurant in his name and run it together with Hassan.

103 See Chapter Two and Four on the importance of women in finding a spouse for male relatives. Because of the gender norms and limits on gender mixing in the camp, women took on the responsibility of finding suitable marriage candidates through their social networks.

almost winter, when social visits would become less common. Was he supposed to spend the whole winter in the apartment alone? Yasmeen asked. Hassan needed someone to keep him company, to be there with him. But she still had no luck finding a bride, and Hassan himself did not have anyone in mind either.

According to Yasmeen, her brother's single status meant that he would be left alone in Jordan without any immediate relatives. The remedy for this was to get him married. She therefore focused her energy during her last days in Jordan on finding her brother a suitable bride to make sure he would not be left alone in Jordan. Hassan did however have relatives in Wihdat, and would not be left completely on his own. One of Hassan and Yasmeen's aunts had married a Jordanian-Palestinian man from Wihdat a few decades earlier. The aunt's family had 'bailed them out' of Za'atari camp and helped them settle in Wihdat. A second aunt had moved to Wihdat with her husband and children in 2013. Nevertheless, Yasmeen worried that her departure from Jordan would have a big impact on her brother. In addition to his anticipated loneliness, it would become more difficult for him to find a suitable bride and start his own family after his sister's departure, as men depended on women relatives for finding future partners.

Displacement has a grave impact on most aspects of refugees' lives. While development reports focus on the material obstacles refugees face, with the difficulty of finding proper jobs and paying for rent, and on the sense of insecurity refugees feel in unknown territory, one aspect that is often overlooked is the impact the shattering of social networks has. Many of my interlocutors have lost relatives due to the war, and similar to Yasmeen and Hassan, have most other relatives scattered between Syria and other countries in the region. One of the consequences was the fear of isolation and loneliness, especially when it came to single young men. Marriage, to some, provided a desirable solution to counter these prospects.

Imm Shafiq, similar to Yasmeen, hoped that her son's marriage would help him deal with the consequences of war and displacement. A thirty-six-year-old widow from Damascus, she arrived in Jordan in 2012 with her four children, two of her brothers, a sister, and their families. Other siblings ended up in Turkey and Lebanon, while her parents remained in Syria as they were unable to travel due to old age. Imm Shafiq talked a lot about her deceased husband. She said that the two of them were very much in love even though they did not know each other well before their engagement. He was her brother's friend and when he asked for her hand in marriage, considering him quite handsome, she agreed to the match when both of them were twenty years old.

When the fights between the Syrian and the Free Army approached their Damascus neighbourhood, Imm Shafiq went with her children to seek shelter at her sister's house, while Abu Shafiq stayed at a cousin's place. After Abu Shafiq heard

that their neighbourhood had been shelled and looted, he went to check up on their house together with his brother. Unfortunately, they were both captured by the Syrian army, tortured, and killed. Imm Shafiq recalled that she lost her mind when she learned of her husband's death. It was not easy to retrieve his body as the neighbourhood he was killed in was still being shelled. Eventually some relatives were able to bring his body to his parents' house and they buried him. Her son Shafiq was twelve years old at the time, and even though she did not see her husband's mutilated body, her son did.

Imm Shafiq explained the effect this had on her son, who was very close to his father. He seemed to be angry all the time, and once went up to the roof in an apparent attempt to commit suicide. Imm Shafiq still cried over her husband regularly, and so did Shafiq: 'until I got him engaged. I got him engaged so he would forget. Thank God now he is different. He is laughing again.' Shafiq was fifteen years old, and engaged to his seventeen-year-old cousin Aya, who had also come to Jordan with her family. Imm Shafiq explained her son's engagement:

When Shafiq was born my husband told me 'the moment Shafiq says he wants to get married, even if he is ten years old, I will get him married.' He said so and we laughed and joked. I told him, 'don't be silly, what, ten years old?' ... When he died, I kept hearing his words in my ears. When we came here [to Wihdat], Shafiq's two cousins got engaged at the same time. So what did Shafiq tell me? He told me, 'mama both of them are getting married. What about me?' I asked him, 'do you want to get married? Really?' First we were joking, but I turned the conversation to serious. I told him, 'sweetie, do you want to get married?' And honestly, I wanted him to cheer up. A woman can change a man. Now they are engaged, he brings her gifts, and goes out with her. You feel there is something in this world. His life has changed. Not only work and difficulties, and fights between me and him.

They only concluded a *kitab sheikh*,<sup>104</sup> and did not yet conclude their *kitab* at court. A Syrian Sheikh came to the house and we concluded the *kitab*. I let them go out together. They are happy.

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104 *Kitab* means the conclusion of a marriage contract. *Kitab Sheikh* is a the Islamic conclusion of the marriage by a sheikh outside of the court. Here the *kitab* signalled the start of the engagement period. See Chapter Two for more on this topic.

Imm Shafiq believed that the engagement and future marriage of her son would contribute to his well-being and help him cope with his experience of war and losing his father. The family's move to Jordan also added to Shafiq's stressful state; he carried a tremendous responsibility as the oldest son to care for his widowed mother and his siblings, but jobs were scarce. When the family first arrived in Wihdat, he started working in garbage-picking and then in a butter factory. Imm Shafiq recounted that he worked long hours and returned home physically exhausted. At the time of his engagement he started working together with his uncles at a local restaurant. Imm Shafiq was happy he now worked with her brothers who would keep an eye on him and treat him right.

Shafiq and Aya were planning to get married within a year. Their marriage would be termed an early marriage by development organizations, and a violation of children's rights. In Imm Shafiq's account, however, the engagement and future wedding were the opposite: a positive change in her son's life. His engagement to his cousin was seen to compensate, if only partially, for the loss of his father, and it gave him something to look forward to after a hard day at work.

While both Yasmeen and Imm Shafiq believed the lives of the persons they loved would be improved by marriage, the two cases also differ in some respects. Hassan was a young adult man who was soon to be left alone in Jordan without immediate relatives—while Shafiq was a fifteen-year-old who had just lost his father, but had the rest of his family with him. Hassan had left Syria out of fear that as a young man he would be either called up for army duty or persecuted if he objected to fight on the side of the Syrian army. Having a social network in Wihdat facilitated his settlement in Jordan and helped him find a job. The fact that he was living with his sister's family for the first years of displacement might have initially eased his move to Jordan, but soon he would be left to fend for himself. Hassan and his sister Yasmeen aspired to marriage as a way for Hassan to find a companion, start his own family, and counter the foreseen loneliness.

In contrast to Hassan, Shafiq lived in Wihdat together with his mother and siblings, and had many other close relatives living close by. He was traumatized by war and the loss of his father, and carried financial responsibility for his family. Having had no relatives in Jordan already to smooth the transition there, the fact that Imm Shafiq's family was accompanied by her relatives to Wihdat eased their settlement and gave them a support network. Imm Shafiq, in a similar vein to Yasmeen, hoped that her son's marriage would have a positive influence on his well-being, and contribute to a sense of intimacy and happiness that would help him overcome the difficulties he had endured for the last few years.

## Marriage as aspiration

In both ethnographic cases, the men and their female relatives aspired to a marriage. Aspirations are about visions of the good life (Chua 2014, Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2017, Appadurai 2004), and well-being (Fischer 2014). Ideas about what a good life entails derive from larger cultural and ethical values (Appadurai 2004: 187; Baillergeau et. al. 2015: 13). Marriage was a central practice through which my interlocutors imagined a good life and future because it was culturally a familiar and acceptable practice, and an expected and desirable step in life for most Syrians. The marriages of Hassan and Shafiq would ensure company, intimacy, and starting or expanding one's own family. In addition, they would provide access to new networks and support systems that were lost due to the war. While these characteristics can be typical of marriage in general, and are not specific to Syrian refugees in Jordan, the experiences of war and displacement strengthened their importance and urgency.

While the body of work that has examined the relation between marriage and aspirations is limited, it has done so with a variety of foci. Some scholars for example examined how women balance their career aspirations and their marriage and parenting aspirations (Blaska 1978, Johnston et. al. 2011), thus looking at competing aspirations and how people adapt them throughout their lives. Others have conducted research on the changing marriage aspirations of women in various settings, such as in rural areas and in ethnic minority groups, where women voiced their desire to have an increased say in their marriage choices and autonomy after marriage (Nguyen 2011; Kalpagam 2008). In this literature it is not necessarily marriage itself that is aspired to, but specific changes in marriage processes and practices. In contrast to this literature, this chapter takes marriage itself—the desire to get married—as the object of aspiration, and investigates how conditions of displacement impact it.

Liberatore has made the case that marriage is a site of aspiration because it 'engages the ethical imagination—the means and modes by which individuals reimagine relations to self and others' (2016: 781).<sup>105</sup> She builds on Khan's understanding of aspiration as a process of becoming and striving (2012) in order to show how educated pious Somali women in London talk about their desired marriages and future marriage partners. By investigating their marriage talk, processes of change and imagination come to light, as women 'articulate, contest, and imagine new possibilities for the future' (788).

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105 Liberatore uses Moore's (2011) definition of ethical imagination.

It is this ability of marriage talk to encapsulate both (self-)reflection and imagination that became evident in my conversations with Yasmeen and Imm Shafiq. By focusing on marriage as the desired solution for what they deemed a problematic state, the women were able to reflect on their past and present situation, and imagine a different future through marriage. As I will show in more detail in the following sections, family and intimate social connections played an important role in my interlocutors' vision of the good life and their well-being, an area of their lives that was gravely impacted by war and the ensuing displacement. Moreover, while Liberatore and the abovementioned literature focus on marriage as an individual aspiration and refrain from discussing the collective nature of such aspirations, the role of marriage in (re)building social networks and the collective dimension of marriage are crucial elements for Syrians in Wihdat.

## The collective dimension of marriage

Women played an important role in matchmaking efforts among Palestinian and Syrian residents of Wihdat. This was mainly due to the expected gender behaviour and gender segregation. As there was limited space for men and women to interact directly and agree on a match, women used their social networks in order to ask around and gain access to prospective brides for their male relatives. While this task was usually undertaken by mothers of a prospective groom, other female relatives and acquaintances also helped in the search. This collective effort, in which many individuals besides the couple played an important role in finding a marriage match, turned the marriage aspiration into a collective aspiration.

In Hassan's case, Yasmeen's departure made the help of other female acquaintances more relevant in his marriage pursuit. A week after Yasmeen and her family flew to the United States, a mutual Syrian friend, Imm Rasem, told me she had met a young woman at a wedding she attended. Imm Rasem approached the woman and her mother asking whether they were interested in a marriage, as she believed the woman to be a good marriage match for Hassan. The family was interested, but they lived in the north of Jordan. After a few phone calls the woman and her mother decided to come to Amman in order to meet Hassan.

When I asked Imm Rasem why she had taken on the responsibility to help Hassan find a wife, she replied: 'you saw how Yasmeen was looking! Already before she left I was helping her.' Hassan and Imm Rasem went to visit the prospective bride, together with Hassan's aunt Imm Nasser, who had also recently moved to Jordan. Hassan and the woman appeared to like each other. During the visit, Has-

san called his mother in Syria through Skype so she could see and talk to the prospective bride and give her opinion of the match.

In a community where marriage is a collective effort, and where relatives are involved in finding a match and negotiating marriage conditions, marriage also becomes a collective project. Aspirations are formed through social interactions and often have a collective nature (Appadurai 2004: 60; Baillergeau et. al. 2015: 263). Here the collective nature is reflected in the participation of several people in the marriage project, all of them feeling a sense of responsibility and deeming the marriage an important step for the specific individual. When Yasmeen was unable to find a bride for Hassan, her friends, including Imm Rasem, took over the responsibility and continued in their attempts to find Hassan a wife, in a way filling the role of Yasmeen, and of their mother, in their absence.

Imm Nasser, Hassan's aunt, later confided in me that she actually went with Hassan to meet the woman with an ulterior motive: in case the match did not work out for Hassan, the woman might be a good match for her own son Nasser. She was happy however that Hassan and the woman appeared to get along. Her husband Abu Nasser then commented: 'Our son has us, his family is with him here, so there is no rush to get him married. Hassan has no one here. So he has priority.' Hassan's relatives were keen on seeing him get married, and his displacement in Jordan without his family increased the urgency of their collective aspiration.

Shafiq's engagement was also a collective effort, in which family members attempted to help each other as best they could. A month after Imm Shafiq arrived in Jordan she was smuggled out of Za'atari camp and moved to Wihdat, where she shared a house with her two brothers and their families for the first three years. Only recently had Imm Shafiq and one of her brothers moved to a bigger house, while the second brother remained in the house on the same street. For three years, all the children lived together in one house, in Imm Shafiq's words 'like siblings sharing everything.' Shafiq brought up the idea of marriage with his mother after his two cousins had gotten engaged. According to Imm Shafiq, when she asked her son whom he wanted to marry, he answered 'I want cousin Aya. Where else should I look for a girl? We have no-one else here.' Imm Shafiq continued telling me: 'And he is right, we have no one here except for God. I looked at him and asked, 'Aya?' He said, 'Aya.' I said, 'ok.'" After Shafiq went to work that day, Imm Shafiq approached Aya and her mother, Imm Shafiq's sister-in-law. At first, the sister-in-law laughed because she thought Shafiq was too young to get married. Aya smiled and did not say anything. Imm Shafiq told her that the smile must mean she agreed to the match. She continued:



Aya started laughing. Half joking, half serious the match was made. My brother immediately said, 'I will give her to you and I don't want anything from you.' And also, you know, with brothers no matter what I bring or give it is different than taking a stranger. With a strange girl you need to bring expensive things. They will not appreciate your situation. But your brother will. *Elhamdulillah*. They are coddling my son.

The fact that Shafiq got engaged to Imm Shafiq's relative was very important to her. Her brother's family were not 'strangers.' They cared about her and about her son. They were aware of her conditions and accepted the fact that Imm Shafiq would not be able to fulfil all the financial expectations and obligations of a groom's mother. When the match was agreed upon, Aya's father approached Shafiq about taking him on at the restaurant where he worked. Even though Shafiq had no experience, Imm Shafiq said her brother did it to ease the situation on her and her son: 'My brothers wanted to give him more comfort. They saw me crying over his fate working at the factory. He had no life. He left angry, came back angry. Went to work and came back to sleep. When he started working with my brothers his situation improved a little. He started joking. And when I got him engaged, he changed a hundred per cent.'

The collective dimension of marriages is visible in the way they are concluded, in addition to their effects. They have the potential to create new social networks and support systems, and consolidate existing ones. Evidence of the importance of marriages in rebuilding social networks lay in the fact that the closest acquaintances of Syrian interlocutors in and around Wihdat were the families of their children's spouses. The only reason why Imm Rasem knew Hassan and Yasmeen was because her daughter had married a cousin of Hassan. Imm Rasem found new friends, and emotional and practical support, through the networks she gained access to through her daughters' marriages. She also helped them whenever she could, as she did when she took up Yasmeen's responsibility in helping Hassan find a wife.

Shafiq's marriage together with the job change were undertaken by Imm Shafiq and her family in order to ease Shafiq's life in displacement. It simultaneously strengthened the bonds between the families of Imm Shafiq and her brother. While in other cases interlocutors had voiced their ambivalence about marrying a close relative, fearing family intervention could cause marital strife between the couple, cousin-marriage was desirable to Imm Shafiq and her relatives. The lack of social networks in Jordan increased the importance of the small familial social

circle that accompanied them to Jordan, as the family cared for and took care of each other.

While Shafiq's marriage would most probably mean an increase in his financial responsibilities, both him and his mother still regarded marriage as desirable. Much of the work of development organizations focuses on preventing (early) marriages as a way of coping with poverty. The assumption is that marriages are motivated by families in order to have one mouth less to feed; or by the *mahr*, the dower the family receives from a groom. The fact that refugee families pursue marriages in contexts of poverty could also indicate the opposite. Despite the financial difficulties and broader uncertainties of living in displacement, marriage remains important because of what it provides: intimate and close social connections. Marriage is therefore aspired to by young refugees and their relatives, and collectively pursued.

## Gender, vulnerability and aspiration

Not only is the marriage a collective aspiration, it is also gendered in a particular way. In the two cases illustrated above, the marriage is actively pursued by women on behalf of their male relatives. This is, first, because of the gendered marriage processes among Syrians in which women play an integral role in finding marriage partners for their male relatives, which leads to the aspiration to function differently for men and women. And second, Syrians often consider refugee men vulnerable and in need of help, in ways that might overlap with women's experiences of vulnerability, but also in ways that differ and are particular to men's experience.

Families generally attempt to help loved ones, regardless of their gender, and want a good life for them. Marriage, however, emerged as a gendered aspiration because of the nature of my interlocutors' marriage practices. Men often depended on their female relatives to find them a future spouse; mothers and sisters especially, and sometimes other senior female relatives such as aunts, played a significant role. As previously discussed, matches were usually initiated by a groom's mother when she thought her son was ready for marriage, and started to look among her social network for bride candidates. Even when a man wanted to get married, as both Hassan and Shafiq did, marriage mainly remained a female affair,<sup>106</sup> and so the aspiration to find a marriage match and get the man married

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106 At least until a preliminary match was agreed upon, after which male relatives started to play an important role as well.

was a collective aspiration acted upon by the (senior) women on the groom's side. Brides were on the receiving end of a marriage proposal and did not openly take initiative in searching for a groom, even if they desired to get married as well. The groom and the prospective bride remained for the most part passive during this initial matchmaking phase, at least until a match was agreed upon and preparations for a wedding started.

There are some exceptions to the lack of initiative on the bride's or couple's side. One exception is the case where a couple already knows each other before a marriage proposal. Such couples—who might already have been in a romantic relationship—often try to cloak their proposal as a 'traditional' one, and hide their prior knowledge of each other from certain members of the family. Other exceptions might be in cases where a woman might not openly be able to search for a groom, but finds ways to actively navigate that. One tactic I witnessed was of young women attending weddings who put a lot of effort into clothes and make-up in an attempt to draw the attention of grooms' mothers.

The particularly gendered and collective character of the marriage pursuit is made evident by comparing Shafiq's engagement to that of his two sisters. At the time I met Imm Shafiq, her eldest daughter Shaima, who was thirteen years old, was also engaged to her cousin, Aya's brother. The match came about when Imm Shafiq's brother asked her for Shaima's hand in marriage for his son, eighteen years old at the time. Shaima was very happy when she heard of the proposal, as she confessed that she had developed feelings for her cousin but had not dared to say so. Imm Shafiq was pleased that Shaima was happy with the match, and that she was engaged to a cousin of whom she was fond—but Imm Shafiq neither saw Shaima as vulnerable as Shafiq, nor that marriage would necessarily improve her current situation. In addition, up until the request for marriage no active steps were taken on the side of Shaima or Imm Shafiq to pursue a marriage. At the time of our conversation, Shaima was still engaged with a *kitab sheik*. Imm Shafiq said that she did not want her daughter to get married yet: 'Let her stay here a little longer. Until she is more mature, at age fifteen, if God is willing.'<sup>107</sup>

During a later visit to the family I learned that the second daughter of Imm Shafiq, Enas, also got engaged at the age of thirteen to her cousin Omar of eight-

107 The fact that Imm Shafiq was approached by her brother also must have played a role in Imm Shafiq's acceptance of her daughter's early engagement. She also stressed that she raised the boy when he was first born, as she was his only unmarried aunt at the time. She loved the boy as if he were her own, and was happy that her daughter was marrying him. The strong reciprocal relations of love and care that bonded this family together seemed to be the main reason why all the cousins ended up asking each other in marriage; relations strengthened by their experience of war and displacement together.

een years old, who lived in Turkey. Omar was the son of Imm Shafiq's sister. Imm Shafiq had first objected to the match as the marriage meant that Enas would move to Turkey. When Enas voiced her opinion of wanting to marry her cousin, Imm Shafiq insisted they ask for the advice of her brothers first (Enas' uncles). I was told by a smiling Imm Shafiq that Enas stormed to her uncle's house shouting, 'if anyone objects to me marrying Omar in front of my mother I will never forgive you!' As a result, Imm Shafiq was convinced of her daughter's wish to get married, and started the process of applying for a passport and visa to Turkey. She insisted she would go with Enas to Turkey for a month to make sure she settled in before returning to Jordan. As she foresaw a long passport and visa application, she did not think her daughter would marry before the age of fifteen, and insisted Enas continued attending school for as long as possible.

While in Hassan and Shafiq's case others acted on their behalf to initiate a marriage match, women and girls were expected to wait for a proposal, at which point they could either object or agree. Aspiring to something involves 'projecting oneself into the future in a desirable way', encompassing an agentive, active subject, and a commitment towards this desirable goal (Baillergeau et. al. 2015: 13). Both young men and women can aspire to get married. However, the case of Imm Shafiq and her children shows that the gendered marriage process among Syrians also leads to the aspiration to function differently for men and women. When men aspire to get married, they depend to a large extent on their female relatives to help them in their pursuit to find a bride, and thus the agency and commitment is female. Young women and girls can also act in order to pursue a marriage match, as Enas showed her agency by voicing her approval despite her mother's hesitation—but this usually only happens after a proposal is made and the prospective bride is asked for her input.

Marriage as an aspiration was not only impacted by the gendered marriage process among Syrians, but also because Syrian families recognized men's vulnerability. Development literature often equates vulnerability with femaleness, and oppression with maleness, presenting vulnerability as an inherent trait of women and girls (e.g Save the Children 2014, UNICEF 2014, the two reports discussed in Chapter Three). This literature portrays women and girls as vulnerable victims—both of socioeconomic conditions caused by displacement, and by conservative cultural values that push them into undesirable forms of marriage. Vulnerability, however, emerges out of complex social and political conditions and manifests itself in various and ambiguous ways. My analysis of the ethnographic material on Palestinian and Syrian Wihdat residents has shown that while young refugee women (and their families) live in precarious conditions, they nonetheless consider themselves active participants and social actors in their marriages. Another

aspect of vulnerability that is obscured by this literature is a thorough examination of how men experience vulnerability.

The concern in both the case of Hassan and of Shafiq was for a male relative. Yasmeen was worried about her brother remaining alone in Jordan, a concern shared among many Syrian families worried about their young refugee male relatives, as these men that often fled direct involvement in the fighting and obligatory military conscription (Turner 2016) arrived in a host country without relatives. Imm Shafiq worried about her eldest son because he was the one who had seen the mutilated body of his father. Additionally, when the family arrived in Jordan, thirteen-year-old Shafiq carried huge social and financial responsibilities. The vulnerability of Hassan and Shafiq in the eyes of their (female) relatives is contrary to the gendered understanding of vulnerability produced by development organizations. Here their vulnerability emerged from their specific conditions in displacement: a single young man displaced without immediate relatives or intimate relations, and a traumatized boy with financial responsibilities towards his family. They are a reminder that men, like women, experience vulnerability due to war and displacement.

Both vulnerability and agency impact marriage practices and aspirations. Refugee families are vulnerable in many respects, and they recognize the vulnerability of men in displacement and act upon it collectively by finding them marriage matches. Women can also show agentive capacities, albeit more of an individual character, in their marriage projects.

## The present and future in marriage aspirations

Chapter Two introduced the marriage story of Eshtiaq, the daughter of Abu Nasser (who happens to be the uncle of Yasmeen and Hassan). When she agreed to a marriage proposal from a Palestinian-Jordanian Wihdat man, Abu Nasser was not happy. Now that she was married to a local Palestinian, she and her future children would remain in Jordan with her husband instead of returning with her family to Syria. Abu Nasser insisted that he would try his best to find a Syrian bride for his son Nasser, and connected this desire with his hope to return to a post-war Syria together with all of his family members.

The intersection of marriage aspirations, national aspirations and the politics of displacement expose the interconnectedness of the different temporalities ref-

ugees inhabit. The hope for a soon-to-come return to a post-war Syria impacted the marriage discourses and decisions of most of my Syrian interlocutors. Unlike the Palestinian residents of Wihdat, Syrians believed that return was a viable option and oriented themselves towards a future back in Syria. This was the main reason Syrian families stressed over and over again that they preferred their children to marry other Syrians: so the family could return together. Since women usually joined their husbands in place of residency, marrying a Syrian was especially important for women. However, Abu Nasser and other Syrian interlocutors also insisted on Syrian spouses for their sons, as they believed the transition back to Syria to be easier when both spouses were Syrian.

The aspiration to get married intersected with their aspiration to return to Syria in the near future. Since Yasmeeen knew of my interaction with Syrian families, she hoped that I could help her find a Syrian bride for her brother. When she left for the United States, her Syrian friends tried to help through their Syrian networks in Jordan. Since Syrians lived throughout the country, it was not rare for Syrians to travel to other regions in order to search for or meet marriage candidates, such as the woman Hassan eventually met who came along with her mother from the north of Jordan.

While a lot has been written on how refugees relate to the past, literature on how refugees orient themselves to the future remains limited (Allan 2014: 31). Humanitarian approaches and scholarly work both assume a temporal linearity of displacement, 'from a distinct point of displacement to a distinct point of refuge' (Ramsay 2017: 2). The case of the Palestinians has shown that displacement can become protracted and last for several generations. Yet most scholarly work focuses on refugees' previous experience of war and displacement, and not on how they imagine and anticipate their future.<sup>108</sup>

The future dimension is also often ignored in the literature of development organizations around marriages, which roots marriage practices in culture and cultural traditions. Culture is usually equated with past-ness, and opposed to development, which is understood in terms of the future (Appadurai 2004: 60). As Appadurai states, 'it is hardly a surprise that nine out of ten treatises on development treat culture as a worry or a drag' (Ibid). Appadurai instead argues for bringing the future into culture by arguing that both ideas of the future and of the past are embedded in cultural values (Ibid: 59). This allows for a more thorough investigation of not only, for example, how refugees attempt to reproduce marriage practices of

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108 Some exceptions are Allan's chapter on dream talk among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (2014), and the articles of the special issue in Kleist and Jansen (2016).

before the war,<sup>109</sup> but also the future orientation of marriages and how they relate to people's vision of the future.

The vision of the desired future, in which marriages are assessed by their ability to facilitate a future return, is simultaneously connected to the past. Syrians envision their future as a return to the place they used to be before displacement: a Syria that they knew from their past.<sup>110</sup> The duration and nature of displacement seem to play a role in the intersection of the future and the past. The longer Syrian displacement might last, the more marriages with fellow Syrians might become rooted in a desire to remember rather than a desire for a future return, as the case for Palestinian refugees has shown. Scholarly work on Palestinian refugees has indicated that marriages with fellow Palestinians stemmed from a fear of forgetting Palestine (Sayigh 1977: 14) and a desire to remember (Jaber 1996: 48). In both Syrian and Palestinian cases however, marriages connect the experience of the past and memories of the homeland with a desired future.

Refugees' orientation towards their future and past also intersect with their experience of the present. The Palestinian case makes clear that in a situation of protracted displacement, access to Jordanian citizenship and all the legal and social benefits that it brings with it facilitates their current lives. They started investing in networks that would not necessarily contribute to a return to Palestine, but to enabling and enhancing their living conditions in Jordan.

While Syrians focused on a future return to Syria, they also oriented themselves towards enhancing their day-to-day situation in the present. Marriages bring with them intimate social networks and entail forming one's own family. Marriage was a way to resume life, to continue living and to compensate for the losses people had endured due to war and displacement. As Shafiq's case shows, while marriages are connected to past experiences of loss and trauma, they are also assumed to alleviate these challenging conditions by rebuilding social networks and intimacies in displacement. In a way, marriages provided for an acceptable and desired way to rebuild a sense of home in displacement, an element I expand on below.

109 See for example Latte-Abdallah's work on marriages among four Palestinian generations in Jordan (2009). She shows that especially for the first generation that grew up in the camps, when families were suffering from poverty and focusing on survival, their marriages reproduced pre-1948 matrimonial practices (2009: 52).

110 It remains to be seen to what extent a future Syria will actually resemble the Syria my interlocutors have left.

## Marriage amid affects and constraints

### LIMITED PATHS FOR THE FUTURE

What contributes to refugees' view of marriage as an important and desirable step for a better future is that other futures are limited. Development organizations usually present two opposed options available to young refugees: marriage and education. While they deem marriage an undesirable future path for young refugees, emphasizing the child's exposure to physical and mental health issues, they promote education as the proper path that will secure more positive futures for young people. I argued for the importance of investigating how the structural conditions of refugees in Jordan are the central impediments preventing educational paths and careers. These conditions include the shortage of school places for Syrian children in Jordan, the lack of financial resources among families, the educational infrastructure, high university and college costs, and the difficulty of finding a job for non-citizens.

Education was often unavailable or difficult to attain for refugee children. Imm Shafiq's children had all lost school-time in Syria during the war. On their arrival in Jordan, Shafiq needed to work and provide for his family and was unable to complete his school education. Shafiq's younger sisters had lost a school year in Syria, but they were enrolled at school in Wihdat and their mother insisted her daughters stay in school until their wedding days. Shaima and Enas were able to receive a spot at a girls' school nearby, but other Syrian children were less lucky, as they were either assigned to schools that were located far away and to which they could not afford transportation, or they were not assigned a school place at all.

Higher education was even more difficult to attain for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Many young Syrians lacked the necessary official documents needed to enrol in higher educational facilities. In addition, Syrians would have to pay the tuition fees of foreign students, yearly amounts that the overwhelming majority of my Syrian interlocutors would be unable to cover. Attaining certain lucrative or stable careers in Jordan was also a near-impossible path for most Syrian refugees. Most Syrian women and men I met tried to gain an income through informal labour at the market, in factories, stores and in restaurants. They relied heavily on charity and humanitarian aid, which was getting scarcer each day.

Development organizations are correct in arguing that refugees' educational paths are limited, even though they locate the needed change on the shoulders of refugee families instead of the educational infrastructure. While many Syrian refugees might have still aspired to an education or a particular career, they were una-



ble to control or change their legal and economic precarity. Pursuing a marriage on the other hand was an attainable goal Syrians could actively work towards.

A central element of an aspiration, besides its desirability, is that the aspirer has to believe it to be attainable and within reach.<sup>111</sup> People's ideas of a good life are impacted by a variety of forces including cultural and religious values, media and the internet, capitalist consumption, and processes of neo-liberalism. People simultaneously face economic and political conditions that constrain these aspirations. A significant achievement of scholarship on aspirations has been to shed light on this gap between people's aspirations and their limiting conditions (Ray 2006) often leading to experiences and feelings of frustration (Schielke 2009, Mains 2007). Aspiring to marriage, while it sometimes induced frustration when women such as Yasmeen seemed unable to find a suitable match, was generally both desirable and considered attainable. This is not to say that there were no obstacles in the face of marriage. Specifically in the case of Syrians in Jordan, many of them lacked the necessary legal documents and went to great lengths to secure them. Financial burdens and impediments also placed limitations on marriage projects. Nevertheless, one important reason marriage remained a desirable aspiration was because it seemed a more feasible project than others.

A second reason marriage emerged as an aspiration—a crucial point that development organizations often miss—is its affective dimension. It provided refugees with social connections, intimacies, and kin relations that became extremely important in the aftermath of war and displacement, and the shattering of existing social networks. This was something other projects were unable to provide, regardless of them being considered attainable or not.

The insecurity and precarity Syrians faced in Jordan made creating some sort of stability through starting one's own family and seeking out intimacy and social networks seem very significant. Syrians planned for a future that included getting married, renting an apartment, and having children, even though they were uncertain whether they would be able to pay for the monthly rent and provide for the family. While marriage might be an aspiration across places and times, here it emerged as one of the few aspirations that Syrian refugees considered attainable, and as being able to contribute to a better life in displacement.

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111 As Ibrahim writes based on the work of Ray (2006): 'Aspirations should not be perceived as too distant to be reached nor as too small to be worth achieving' (2011: 5).

## DISPLACEMENT, AFFECT AND HOME

Displacement connotes the forced move away from a place one belongs to and feels at home. Feeling at home, while often perceived as a natural feeling, is culturally created (Duyvendak 2011: 28). In an extraordinary piece by Sayigh on the meaning of home for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, she argues that the word *beit*—house/home in Arabic— refers on the one hand to the structure, the house, and on the other to a family line and more broadly to the sociality of being close to familiar others (2005: 20). This was reflected in the settlement patterns of Palestinian refugees in the first years of exile, when most Palestinians tried to group themselves according to their villages of origin and live close to each other (Ibid). Especially in the first decades of displacement original village identities were preserved inside the camps (Ibid: 26). This is a reminder that the Palestinian Nakba—the occupation of Palestine in 1948 and Palestinians' exile—'cannot be reduced to the loss of land and property' as it was also a loss of 'an entire social fabric—the dense network of social relations, and one's location within it' (Latif 2008: 257).

Sayigh speaks of the specific case of Palestinians in Lebanon, where civil war and conflict have repeatedly destroyed Palestinian refugee camps. She argues that the '*beit* has always been a social and cultural necessity even as refugees mourned their loss of homes in Palestine, and vowed to return to them' (2005: 32). Jordan has also seen its share of political and social strife. Similar to the Palestinians in Lebanon, maintaining close village and family bonds in the first decades of exile have influenced Palestinians' settlement patterns and played an important social role.<sup>112</sup> With the changing of the character of Wihdat, and people moving in and out, the remaining Palestinian Wihdat residents recognized their multiple homes. Their continuous reference to their villages and towns in Palestine coexisted with them feeling at home in Jordan, and especially in Wihdat.<sup>113</sup> Palestinians' familiarity with—and their history in—Wihdat and Jordan more broadly strengthened their claim and sentiments of belonging to the camp. In addition, even though most Palestinian families have relatives in a number of diasporic locations, the protracted conflict that has displaced them has forced them to rebuild their social lives in Jordan.

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112 In marriages, but also in collective efforts to for example buy plots of burial land (see Jabir 1996: 45).

113 One of the main differences between Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan, is that the majority of the latter possess Jordanian citizenship, while Lebanon never granted any political (or social) rights to its Palestinian residents. The possession of citizenship probably contributes to the sentiments of belonging among Palestinians in Jordan. Nevertheless, as Chapter Two recounted, these sentiments are not stable and differ depending on context and political environment.

Syrian refugees in the first half decade of their displacement were still dealing with the loss and trauma of war. Many Syrians who arrived at the official camps were not allowed to leave the camp, and were forced to group together with Syrians from different parts of the country. Those who left the official refugee camps and settled in cities such as Amman and Irbid did not group together, as they moved to wherever they could find affordable housing. This made searching for Syrian spouses a more difficult task, but building new social networks through marriages all the more desirable.

Home is '*sentimentalized* as a space of belonging' (Ahmed 2013: 89, *italics added*). Whether it is associated with a specific place, a house one lives in, the town one grew up in, the homeland or nation-state—home is about affect: 'being-at-home is a matter of how one feels or how one might fail to feel' (ibid). Similar to the case of Palestinians in Lebanon, home for Syrians lay in socialities and relations. With the loss of social networks and relatives during the war and the ensuing displacement, creating new social connections and intimacies was one way to deal with displacement and regain a sense of home and familiarity. Imm Shafiq lost her husband to the war, and her family was dispersed over four countries. When Shafiq got engaged, the fact that he had someone special in his life to care for and spend time with was what according to his mother made him happier as a person. Additionally it strengthened her relation to her brothers who had also settled in Jordan, and provided her with a much-needed support system. Hassan, with no immediate relatives in Amman, would find comfort and company if he got married. He would not only have a wife and start his own family, but would become part of the bride's family and home. It is important to recognize what marriage can provide refugees. Marriage in displacement functions as a particular aspiration that is pursued collectively as a desired future, partly because it can help those displaced cope emotionally with the losses of war and the impact of displacement.

## Conclusion: marriage, socialities and affect

This chapter focused on two ethnographic cases that showed how the desire for a good life in Jordan and a return to Syria contributed to the emergence of particular marriage aspirations among young Syrian refugees and their families. The focus in this last chapter was on the Syrian experience, because this aspect of marriage becomes more prominent in the first years of exile, with its attendant loss of social networks. The ethnographic cases shed light on how marriage is considered a fundamental path toward rebuilding kin-relations and social networks, finding

intimacies, and gaining a sense of home amidst the daily troubles and difficulties of displacement. This chapter argued for the importance of taking this aspect of marriage in displacement seriously.

Marriage emerged as a collective aspiration in both its process and its effect. First, marriage as a project was often initiated by particular women on behalf of a groom. This points to the gendered nature of marriages and to the particular positionality of the various women involved, such as the mothers and sisters of a groom on the one hand, and the brides—who were expected to be more passive—on the other. Second, the collective effort to get someone married resulted in expanding family networks and (re)building the social support systems and connections not only of individuals, but of entire families, which compensated to an extent for the loss of relatives and networks due to the war and displacement.

Deciding on a marriage and a marriage partner was influenced by the desire to return to a post-war Syria as soon as possible. Since families hoped to return together with the whole family instead of leaving relatives behind in Jordan, Syrian interlocutors voiced their preference for marrying a fellow Syrian. At the same time, marriage was a step Syrians undertook in order to improve their current life in Amman, as it provided them with social connections and intimacies that helped them adapt to refugee life and create a sense of home.

This does not reduce the importance of investigating how marriage is also implicated in reproducing gendered and political inequalities. While I emphasized the importance of home and home-making through marriage, the notion of home should not be romanticized, as home can be an oppressive patriarchy-infused space as well. But even then, as bell hooks has argued in the case of black families in patriarchal white supremacist societies (2015: 76-88), the ability to create a homeplace where dignity and humanness could be restored is an act of resistance.

In situations where people have lost loved ones during war, and are separated from their kin and social networks as a result of displacement, home is about people rather than structures. This is especially the case when refugees face continuous financial and legal obstacles in renting and residing in houses. Just as with the Palestinian refugees in the first years of exile, and during their continuous exposure to war and violence, the affective dimension, the socialities and home-making processes were central aspects of marriage among my Syrian interlocutors. In order to fully understand how marriage and displacement intersect, it is insufficient to look at the undesirable consequences of early marriages in the manner of the development organizations. Rather, this chapter shows the importance of investigating the role of marriages in how refugees make sense of their current precarious situation, and in their orientation towards futures that are uncertain.







Embroidery of a wedding scene in a Palestinian resident's home in Wihdat Camp.  
Photo taken by author.



## Chapter Six



## Conclusions

# Conclusions

This thesis has sought to investigate how refugees and development organizations problematize different forms of marriage in conditions of displacement. It has done so by looking at marriage practices and discourses among Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Jordan, and the intervention projects and discourses of organization. Unsurprisingly, and probably as in most anthropological research, one obvious conclusion is that things are complex. Nevertheless, what this thesis has mainly shed light on is that refugees are busy living life. While narratives produced by development organizations limit the analysis to the negative impact of displacement on marriages, and organizations' intervention projects mainly revolve around eliminating early marriage, marriage practices among refugees facilitate and play an important role in processes of emplacement and home-making in displacement. Whether recent or fourth-generation refugees, Wihdat residents appropriate the spaces available to them; navigate the various legal, social and economic obstacles they face; and attempt to make a good life for themselves and their loved ones.

This thesis has shown that displacement impacts marriage practices in a variety of ways. For example, processes of national identification, belonging, and citizenship rights impact the choice of partners. The normative, legal, and social landscape of their place of residence—in this case Jordan and specifically the Palestinian refugee camp of Wihdat in East Amman—impact marriage processes such as matchmaking efforts, engagements, and marriage conclusions.

Wihdat residents debate the desirability of marrying someone who shares the same national background or who lacks Jordanian citizenship, and whether it is better to marry someone 'familiar' or a 'stranger.' Some object to the 'traditional' way of matchmaking in which women play an important role as they search for a bride for their male relatives. The main objection was to the fact that a couple usually does not know each other well, nor receives enough space to get well-ac-



quainted before marriage. While issues of love, age, national, and socioeconomic background were all issues that came up in marriage discourses, the main element Wihdat residents desired in a marriage was *tafahom*—mutual understanding—between a husband and wife. The existence of mutual understanding depended on various factors, and people had differing opinions regarding which were more or less important. While some put the focus on a specific age of the bride and groom as the basis for mutual understanding, others believed national background, level of education, or degree of religiosity to be the main factor.

Some Palestinians problematize the early registration of marriages during the engagement period because it increases the risk for women to be labelled divorcées if the engagement breaks up. Nevertheless, they locate the practice in their specific East Amman and camp identity. Syrians, on the other hand, navigate the legal landscape of Jordan and the problematization of the non-registration of marriages. Most Syrians were used to a different legal system in Syria where official state-registration was not as vital, but in Jordan this is considered illegal by the state and undesirable by Palestinian and Jordanian residents.

Organizations do not seem to grasp the complexity of this interplay between displacement and marriages in the documents they produce on the topic. A vast majority of publications that address marriages among refugees focuses on early marriages that involve brides under the age of eighteen. These documents focus on a simplified analysis of the impact of displacement on marriage practices—namely, that displacement increases feelings of insecurity and economic impoverishment, which in turn pushes families into marrying off their young daughters as a coping mechanism. Instead of providing a thorough understanding of how refugee girls and their families navigate the precarious conditions they find themselves in, they reduce refugee girls to passive victims, while the men, if included in the narrative at all, are presented as the perpetrators: the fathers marrying their daughters off, or the (old) husbands.

By bringing in cases of Syrian and Palestinian women who married before the age of eighteen along with their mothers, I showed that while Syrian and Palestinian families are vulnerable in the face of displacement and poverty, the girls consider themselves active participants in their marriages, and their families show agentive abilities in navigating their precarious legal and economic conditions. My material also showed that one cannot target the young girls without targeting the structural conditions they face. That is why I argued that the small-scale and localized interventions these development organizations propose based on their analysis are often not relevant to the daily lives of refugees and remain for the most part ineffective.

The fact that intervention projects remain limited in their intended aims does not mean that their work has no impact on the lives of Wihdat residents. Their projects do reach their beneficiaries, but often in ways unintended by these organizations. Most projects are designed on a national or international level; Jordanian and international organizations therefore seek local partners to implement the projects. Employees of these local organizations, in turn, look for locations in the various neighbourhoods to reach the poor, widowed and displaced women who wish to participate in the projects. These employees change and adapt the content of awareness workshops, that is often based on international conventions and global discourses of human rights, to fit in with the daily realities of their targeted beneficiaries. Or better said to fit in with their own assumptions of these daily realities which are imbued with stereotypes and based on local socioeconomic inequalities. Hence, workshops on domestic abuse and gender-based violence can get sidetracked as women instead learn about how neglecting their husbands, wearing ragged clothes, and complaining about their children constitutes the real abuse.

The impact of the work of these organizations on local marriage practices does not so much lie in the content of the projects they provide, but in another unexpected effect. The local centres where these organizations implement their projects become integral to women's lives, and socially embedded in their daily routines. These spaces bring together a variety of women, allowing them to expand their social network, and facilitate new forms of female sociability. In Wihdat, where women's mobility is highly controlled, local centres that are deemed socially respectable places become one of the few places women can visit. As a result, these local centres become one of the places available to women (and to some extent men) to search for brides for their male relatives, and are essential to local matchmaking practices.

One element that is obscured when focusing on the problematic dimension of marriages in displacement is the fact that marriages are also an aspiration. Especially among refugees who have been recently displaced marriages are essential in rebuilding social networks, and for finding intimacies and creating a new sense of home. Syrians—who at the time of research were still dealing with the direct impacts of displacement—believed that marriages would contribute to the well-being of their loved ones in displacement. I argued for the importance of incorporating these elements of aspiration into the analysis of marriage practices, as it sheds light on how refugees navigate their present and future, within and in dialogue with the imposed conditions of displacement.

## MARRIAGE AND DISPLACEMENT

This thesis investigated marriages as practices and experiences that intersect with the experience of displacement. I looked at how actors on the ground got married, how matches were made, and which elements featured in their decision-making regarding marriages. In the specific case of Palestinians and Syrians in Jordan, I showed the importance of the particularity of their displacement. Looking at marriage practices made clear how refugees navigate Wihdat's infrastructure, the social environment, and their legal position in Jordan. This research might not shed light on the refugee experience at large. Refugee camps in Lebanon or Bangladesh will differ very much from Wihdat Camp. There are other Palestinian camps in Jordan that are very different in history, landscape and composition. Moreover, the way refugees are treated in host countries, and their relationship to their home-country differ from one refugee case to another. Nevertheless, some elements introduced in this thesis can contribute to an understanding of marriages in displacement beyond this particular context.

First, refugees develop senses of belonging and identifications in displacement. They form new attachments to their place of residency in exile and to other populations that live in the host country. These new attachments can coexist with national and religious identifications and with a feeling of belonging to a homeland. Marriage is a site where these forms and processes of identification become clear, as it is through marriage that one confirms or transgresses boundaries, and it is through marriage that one strengthens existing ties and produces new ones.

Second, refugee camps can at once be sites of governmentality and violence, and sites of intimacy and home-making. Through marriages, families and individuals rebuild their social networks, start their own families, and make a place for themselves in displacement. Refugees are also actively involved in shaping their environment and appropriating it. This thesis showed that the infrastructure of the camp becomes integrated into the daily lives and social practices of residents. Local centres that provide workshops become places where women make friends, and marriage matches are made. While these local centres and the organizations that use these spaces for their projects might be involved in the management of refugees, refugee communities also use these spaces for their own ends in ways that are often unintended by the organizations in question. In order to investigate these processes, one must look at the practices of social actors on the ground.

Third, displacement—more than simply a condition—is an experience. This thesis showed that one cannot talk about a general refugee experience without contextualizing it. It is imperative to investigate which elements are influenced by the specific conditions of a refugee's displacement, and which elements are

not necessarily subsumed under this experience. One case in point is the fact that while Palestinians and Syrians had different opinions about marriages to spouses of specific national backgrounds and legal statuses, they seemed to agree on the fact that mutual understanding is one of the most important ingredients of a successful marriage. This is one element that was not directly influenced by their refugee experience, but by their ideas and experiences with marriage.

## NAVIGATING DISPLACEMENT, SENSES OF BELONGING, AND MARRIAGE

Displacement and refugee-ness are often discussed as a static state of being, a condition. However, social formations and environments are in constant movement. The conditions of displacement and what being a refugee entails change over time and with geopolitical developments. Bringing in the two cases of refugee-ness, that of the Palestinians and of the Syrians, showed the importance of looking at—among other things—the duration of displacement, the conflict that precipitated their flight, the relation between and history of the refugee group and the host country, refugee-refugee relations and overlapping displacements, legal and humanitarian conditions, and the place of residence in exile.

The fact that marriage practices change with the changing character of displacement is most obvious in the case of Labiba. Of all the Syrian interlocutors I met, the only person who ever mentioned the desire to attain Jordanian residency was fourteen-year-old Labiba (whom I discussed in Chapter Three). In a conversation with her and her older sister Sara, Labiba said that her fiancé's father was Syrian and his mother was Palestinian-Jordanian. She hoped that his mother's background might enable him to apply for a Jordanian residency for both himself and Labiba. To her this was important, as she hoped to be able to travel together with her future husband, and she had accepted that she would most probably remain in Jordan for many years to come.

Labiba was also the only Syrian who openly expressed to me her desire to marry a non-Syrian. Because of her familiarity and interaction with Palestinians in Wihdat, they also became more desirable as future spouses. This familiarity trumped her desire to marry a Syrian in order to go back to Syria as a family in the future. Labiba said that she had told her mother already before her engagement that she wanted to marry a Palestinian: "I like them! My friends are all Palestinian and I like them." The friends she was referring to were her school classmates. Just like the way local centres became spaces that brought Syrian and Palestinian women together, schools did the same for the younger generation.

In that same conversation, I asked the two sisters how they found living in Jordan. Sara, the older sister, stressed that they were comfortable in Jordan as they were away from war, but they did not really interact much with Jordanians. Labiba agreed and said that they usually visited Syrian relatives who also lived in Jordan. Then Labiba stressed her attachment to Wihdat: “We visit my uncles in Zarqa, Ramtha and Irbid. But the best place is Wihdat. We got used to it. We have been here for five years now. We go to the market. I know all the streets of Wihdat. I feel I am Jordanian or Palestinian. I will miss it when I go to Sehab [where her fiancé lives].”

At the time of this conversation, Labiba had lived one-third of her lifetime in Wihdat. She still remembered her life in Syria, which she left as a nine-year-old child, but her attachments to places and people were shaped during her formative years in displacement. As a new generation of young Syrians is growing up in Wihdat, the camp’s meaning will change from a safe shelter (as it was to Sara), to a space imbued with emotional attachments and feelings of belonging.

One of the main distinctions between Palestinians and Syrians in Wihdat was the protracted nature of Palestinian refuge. This thesis shows that with the passing of time, Syrians in Jordan might also develop new attachments in Jordan. This can have various implications for their marriage practices. Legal residency and identity papers will become an important element to consider, and the emphasis on marrying fellow-Syrians to facilitate return might decrease in importance. This shows the significance of locating displacement in a specific historic moment, and investigating how it interacts with other structural elements such as legal status and prospects of return.

## DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVES AND THE COMPLEXITIES OF MARRIAGE IN DISPLACEMENT

At a two-day conference on early marriages, migration, and displacement, a handful of scholars presented on the complexities of marriages involving brides under the age of eighteen. The concluding presentation was given by a research officer of *Girls not Brides*, a global partnership of organizations ‘committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential’ (Girls not Brides n.d.). The officer stated that while some girls choose to marry at an early age, and that it might not always have a direct negative impact on them (as was shown by the intensive ethnographic research presented by several researchers before her), according to her by acknowledging this, ‘eventually what we are saying to the girl is that you are nothing, nothing but a wife and a mother.’ To support her presentation, which focused on the negative implications of early marriage and the need to provide

girls with an education, she used a PowerPoint presentation filled with images of young, non-Western-looking girls. These images did not correspond directly to the content of her talk, but rather functioned as background decoration for her words. The officer, in essence, confirmed that organizations espouse the message that being a mother is 'nothing' and that girls should receive an education regardless of their aspirations. Or rather she assumed—as many organizations do—that girls will always want to study, and that following an education is the only way girls can reach their 'full potential.' She also did what many organizations do: use visual material to evoke empathy and represent one stereotypical 'type' of refugee girl.

After the presentation, some of those present and I went outside to vent. Have not we just presented one case after the other about the importance of recognizing the complexities involved, and the need to complicate this single narrative? How was this the concluding presentation? It disregarded all that we had been saying for the last two days and the research we had been conducting for years. While organizations often voice the need for more in-depth and extended research to inform their interventions, many of them eventually fall back into repeating the same reductive narrative of early marriages in displacement: that cultural traditions, when combined with displacement, lead to the oppression of girls who are forced into a marriage, and as a result are prevented from reaching their full potential.

With this thesis, I hope to have shown the importance of looking at the complexities of marriages in displacement instead of shying away from them. The question to ask next is what to do with this complexity. How can practitioners that work with refugee groups implement positive work while embracing this complexity? How can they convince (Western) donor organizations that girls do not have to be passive victims in order to receive much-needed aid? They can be active participants both in their lives and in the interventions these organizations design. How can we take refugee families seriously even when they present us with moral and practical dilemmas? I hope to have started answering a few of these questions by arguing for the need to look at a fuller picture. If one wants to improve the financial situation of refugee families so that they do not turn to early marriage, it is not sufficient to open up a new classroom or provide daily transportation money for a school bus. One needs to address the structural conditions of refugees that prevent them from gaining legal residency and working permits. It is not enough to design an awareness workshop in which girls and their mothers are told that they could become doctors and lawyers instead of mothers and wives, when actually they cannot, or might not want to. More has to be done, and it all starts with changing the reductive narrative that can only recognize refugee girls (and to some extent

their families) as passive victims. Vulnerability and agency are not mutually exclusive.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

In the end, one should not forget that refugee predicaments are not contained by national borders. This thesis was limited in scope as it focused on Jordan. However, the responsibility for the Palestinian refugee 'problem' lies with the Israeli State, which has for seven decades refrained from seriously engaging with them in seeking a solution and recognizing their right of return. While this situation is maintained with the complicity of countries such as Jordan, the creation of the State of Israel is what caused the upheaval and uprooting of millions of Palestinians. The Israeli State and its allies have subsequently tossed aside the Palestinian refugees and deemed them irrelevant to any 'peace' talks. The same applies to the case of Syrian refugees. Their situation is first and foremost caused by a ruthless Syrian regime, by a geopolitical order in which states are involved in maintaining the war, have benefited from the weapon-trade, and are complicit in the death and insecurity of thousands of Syrian refugees by closing off borders and restricting asylum seeking—in Jordan and abroad.

Even though I was able to write a whole thesis on Palestinian and Syrian refugees without directly addressing the complicity of governments and the role of geopolitical alliances and interests in maintaining the current status quo, that does not mean these issues are irrelevant. Nevertheless, and keeping in mind Ortnier's argument on the importance of integrating dark anthropology with the anthropology of hope, it is important not to succumb to despair in the face of global injustices. In this 'national order of things' (Malkki 1995), there will always be those that fall outside of the boundaries of nation-states, and refugee-ness will remain an experience shared by millions around the world. While we should not forget the root causes of the refugee predicament, it is imperative to embrace the complexities of structural constraints and agency, isolation and sociability, hope and despair.





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# Summary

In 2016 I conducted ten and a half months of fieldwork researching the impact of displacement on marriage practices among Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Amman. Jordan has a long history with refugees. Palestinians, who are estimated to make up about half of the total population of the country, are first, second, third and fourth generation refugees. They are descendants of the Palestinian families that were displaced in the aftermath of the 1948 War and the creation of the State of Israel, and the 1967 Six-Day War. Since 2012, Jordan has also received an influx of Syrian refugees as a result of the Syrian war. They form an estimated ten per cent of the local population. While the Jordanian state hosts the refugees and plays an important role in their lives, international and local organizations too are central to the refugee issue in Jordan. They take responsibility for refugees' humanitarian needs, and work closely with governments and other local, national and transnational actors to coordinate humanitarian aid, health, and education.

Being a refugee impacts multiple aspects of life. Not only are refugees confronted by the impact of what drove them from their homes, they are also faced with rebuilding lives in a new context. This also impacts marriage practices among the displaced. They have to navigate the Jordanian legal system which regulates marriage, and are confronted with the programs of international and local organizations which intervene in marriage practices. The aim of the research is to understand how displacement impacts marriage practices. The main questions of this research are: How do refugees and development organizations problematize different forms of marriages in situations of displacement and refugee-ness? How does this problematization interact with actual marriage practices and intervention programmes of development organizations on the ground? In order to answer these questions, I conducted interviews, accompanied residents in their daily lives, hung around at local centres and organizations, and participated in their activities.

During my research I lived in close proximity to Wihdat Camp, my main research site. Wihdat is a Palestinian refugee camp in Amman that was set up in the 1950s by the United Nations (UNRWA). More recently, Syrian refugees moved there as well. While the majority of Palestinians in Jordan, including those from Wihdat, possess Jordanian citizenship, some Palestinians are officially stateless and have to renew their residency every three years. Syrian refugees in Jordan fall under the protection of the UNHCR. Not all of the Syrians entered Jordan through the formal channels and as a result lack residency papers.

While displacement evokes the idea that people have lost a sense of belonging, the creation of new attachments that emerge in exile are likewise central elements of the refugee experience. They play an important role in marriage practices, such as the choice of partners, matchmaking processes, and the conclusion of marriages. In this thesis, I show how Wihdat residents get married, from the initial matchmaking steps until the wedding, and the way the normative landscape around gender behaviour in the camp influences marriage practices. The role of women in matchmaking is central because of the limited space for gender-mixing between unrelated men and women; women often take on the responsibility of looking for a suitable bride for their male relatives.

The different relations Palestinians and Syrians have to the camp have an impact on their marriage practices as well. Wihdat is an important identity marker for its Palestinian residents. As such, Palestinians link practices around engagement and marriage registration to their specific East Amman and camp identity. Syrian residents who were accustomed to somewhat different marriage practices in their homeland are often keenly aware of these differences, and sometimes find themselves struggling to adapt to the specific normative behaviour and marriage expectations of the camp.

The particular historical and political context of the Palestinian and Syrian presence in Jordan also effects marriage practices. The prospect of a return to the homeland, the nature of displacement, and the legal status of refugees in Jordan all play an important role. Palestinians who have been exiled for more than seven decades as a result of a settler-colonial project, realize that their near future is in Jordan. Legal residency is therefore a central element Palestinians consider in marriage choices, as people prefer to marry partners who poses Jordanian citizenship. At the time of the research, my Syrian interlocutors, who have a much shorter history of displacement, were still hoping for an end to the war and an imminent return home. While the lack of possessing legal residency had a great impact on their daily lives, it did not play a big role in their choice of marriage partners. Their focus lay on marrying fellow-Syrians in order ensure that the whole family would return to Syria together.

Similarity in national background is a central element in marriage discourses. To Palestinians, a marriage to an Egyptian or Syrian is often undesirable, as they are considered unfamiliar and of a different cultural background. They worry that these factors might negatively impact a marriage. In contrast, many residents stress the similarities between Palestinians and Jordanians, and often collapse their multiple identifications into one identity, Palestinian-Jordanian. Still, at different times and to different people these categories may become antagonistic and Palestinian-ness is stressed in opposition to Jordanian-ness. Palestinians also invoke internal identifications, such as Palestinian village of origin, as an important element to consider in marriage candidates. As Syrians are more dispersed around Jordan and are in smaller numbers in Wihdat, they often feel affinity and familiarity with any Syrian in Jordan, regardless of other internal identifications. Marriage discourses thus highlight which marriages cross boundaries of the familiar and the desired, while simultaneously showing the ambiguity, fluidity and complexity of the different identifications in such discourses.

What many Wihdat residents have in common despite their different backgrounds is their view on what constitutes the basis for a successful marriage: being well-acquainted before marriage and having mutual understanding. Many Wihdat residents therefore criticize the lack of space available to couples to meet and get to know each other well before their wedding. This fits with recent literature critical of the centralization of a dichotomous understanding of concepts of love-based and traditional marriages.

While Palestinians and Syrians debate the desirability of various marriage practices, many Jordanian and international development organizations direct their intervention campaigns towards the prevention of early marriages. They do so through lobbying for legal reform and awareness campaigns. These organizations also conduct and publish studies on the prevalence of early marriages in Jordan and among its refugee populations. These documents produce a simplified narrative in which displacement has a clear, direct, and predictable impact on marriage. According to this narrative, displacement and poverty combined with local traditions lead to early marriages, of which young refugee girls are the victims.

I complicate this narrative by showing that there is a mismatch between the elements highlighted in the development narrative on the one hand, and local discourses on early marriage on the other. Organizations foreground the age of the bride as the element that makes early marriage problematic. Interlocutors, however, focus on the prospects of mutual understanding in a marriage. The age of the bride and groom might play a role in this, but not necessarily so. Moreover, my material shows the necessity of detaching vulnerability from a dichotomous understanding that equates women with victims and men with perpetrators. Even

in cases when a marriage seems to abide by all the elements of the development narrative, vulnerability does not manifest itself as a totalizing condition. While refugee families live in precarious conditions due to their displacement and its aftermath, refugee girls nonetheless consider themselves active participants in their marriages, and navigate the limitations imposed on them.

The interventions that these organizations suggest often remain small-scale, depoliticized, and irrelevant to the daily realities of refugees in Jordan. Moreover, they fail to address the larger forces that create conditions of vulnerability. I argue for shifting attention away from vulnerability as a fixed characteristic of specific groups and individuals, to seeing it as emerging out of complex political and social conditions. This allows for investigating the larger structural factors, such as legal status, the educational infrastructure and work opportunities, that impact life in displacement, and hence marriage practices among refugees.

Most projects that target marriage practices in Wihdat come in the form of awareness workshops. While their aim is to educate local residents on international children and women's rights and prevent early marriages, these workshops get sidetracked and often reach their audiences in unintended ways. Local organizations play an important role in this sidetracking process as they implement projects that are designed on a national or international scale within local communities. Those providing the workshops change and adapt the content of the project based on prior assumptions they hold about the targeted beneficiaries—assumptions that are influenced by local social and economic inequalities.

These organizations usually implement their projects in local centres in and around Wihdat. Ironically, it is rarely the content of the workshops that impact marriage practices. Rather, the effect they have comes through the spaces these local centres provide. By targeting a wide variety of women, local centres facilitate new forms of female sociability as they provide space for the interaction between Syrian and Palestinian Wihdat women. These centres add to the existing spaces and networks through which Wihdat residents can find a spouse. They function as encounter zones and give women in search of a bride for a son or brother access to women from outside their familial social networks. Additionally, employees of these centres become figures of authority and are often asked for advice and support in marriage pursuits. The embeddedness of local centres in the lives of Wihdat residents and their match-making practices shows the importance of investigating the impact of the work of development organizations beyond their official discourses and policies.

One major effect of displacement is the shattering of social networks. Especially in the first years following displacement, people deal with the loss of loved ones caused by the conflict, and the dispersion of family members all over the



region. I argue that marriage emerges as a particular aspiration in displacement because of its role in rebuilding new social networks and intimacies. Palestinians live in a protracted state of displacement. With no prospects of a near return to Palestine and in possession of Jordanian citizenship, they recognize that their near future is in Jordan. For Syrians, deciding on a marriage and a marriage partner is influenced by the hope of returning to a post-war Syria as soon as possible. Marriage is simultaneously a step Syrians undertake in order to improve their present life in Amman, and to recreate a sense of home—a home embodied not by structures, but by people and social connections.

Displacement and refugee-ness are often discussed as a static condition. However, social formations and environments are in constant movement. The conditions of displacement, as well as what being a refugee entails, change over time and with geopolitical developments. In displacement refugees develop senses of belonging and identifications. They form new attachments to their place of residency in exile and to other populations that live in the host country. Marriage is a site where these forms and processes of identification become clear, as it is through marriage that one confirms or transgresses boundaries, and that one strengthens existing ties and produces new ones. Through marriages families and individuals build their social networks, start their own families, and make a place for themselves in displacement. Instead of producing narratives that can only recognize refugees (and especially girls) as passive victims of marriage practices, as many development organizations do, this thesis shows that while refugees live in precarious conditions, they are nevertheless social actors involved in shaping and appropriating their environment.



# Samenvatting

In 2016 verbleef ik ruim tien maanden in Jordanië om veldonderzoek te doen naar de impact van ontheemding op huwelijkspraktijken onder Palestijnse en Syrische vluchtelingen. Jordanië heeft een lange geschiedenis met vluchtelingen. Palestijnse vluchtelingen werden ontheemd tijdens de oprichting van de staat Israël in 1948 en de zesdaagse oorlog van 1967. Zij en hun nazaten vormen thans naar schatting ongeveer de helft van de totale bevolking van Jordanië. Sinds 2012 is er ook een toestroom van Syrische vluchtelingen naar Jordanië als gevolg van de Syrische burgeroorlog. De Syrische vluchtelingen vormen naar schatting inmiddels tien procent van de Jordaanse bevolking.

Vluchtelingen worden genoopt een totaal nieuw leven op te bouwen in een onbekende omgeving. Daarbij moeten vluchtelingen zich vaak verregaand aanpassen aan de wetten en gebruiken van het land waarnaar ze gevlucht zijn. Deze aanpassingen kunnen elk facet van het leven behelzen, inclusief huwelijkspraktijken. Vluchtelingen in Jordanië moeten hun huwelijk regelen volgens het Jordaanse huwelijksrecht en zich houden aan de voorschriften van internationale en lokale ontwikkelingsorganisaties die zich bezighouden met het controleren en regelen van huwelijkspraktijken.

Het doel van dit onderzoek is om inzicht te krijgen in de invloed die ontheemding heeft op huwelijkspraktijken en de rol die ontwikkelingsorganisaties daarbij spelen. De centrale vragen zijn: Hoe problematiseren ontwikkelingsorganisaties het huwelijk onder vluchtelingen? Hoe doen Palestijnse en Syrische vluchtelingen dat zelf? Hoe verhouden hun zienswijzen zich tot hun werkelijke huwelijkspraktijken en tot de interventieprogramma's van ontwikkelingsorganisaties? Om deze vragen te beantwoorden heb ik interviews afgenomen, vluchtelingen vergezeld tijdens hun dagelijkse bezigheden en rondgehangen bij plaatselijke centra en organisaties.

Tijdens mijn onderzoek woonde ik in de buurt van Wihdat, mijn primaire onderzoekslocatie. Wihdat is een Palestijns vluchtelingenkamp in Amman dat in de jaren vijftig door de Verenigde Naties (UNRWA) is opgezet. Sinds enkele jaren zijn ook Syrische vluchtelingen in het kamp gaan wonen. Terwijl de meerderheid van de Palestijnen in Jordanië (inclusief de Palestijnen uit Wihdat) in het bezit zijn van de Jordaanse nationaliteit, zijn sommige Palestijnen officieel stateloos en moeten ze hun verblijfsstatus om de drie jaar vernieuwen. Syrische vluchtelingen in Jordanië vallen daarentegen onder de bescherming van de UNHCR. Syriërs die niet via de 'officiële' route naar Jordanië zijn gevlucht bezitten geen verblijfsdocumenten.

Terwijl ontheemding het idee oproept dat mensen hun gevoel van verbondenheid verloren zijn, is het aangaan van nieuwe verbanden die ontstaan tijdens vluchtelingenschap ook een centraal element in de ervaring van vluchtelingen. Deze verbanden spelen een belangrijke rol binnen huwelijkspraktijken. In dit proefschrift laat ik zien hoe zulke verbanden invloed hebben op onder meer de keuze van huwelijkspartners, het koppelen van potentiële huwelijkskandidaten en het sluiten van huwelijken. Ik ga in op het volledige huwelijksproces onder vluchtelingen, vanaf de eerste kennismaking tot het moment van de bruiloft zelf, en bespreek daarbij de manier waarop normatieve opvattingen rondom gender in het kamp de huwelijkspraktijken beïnvloeden. Ik focus op de centrale rol van vrouwen in het koppelingsproces vanwege de beperkte ruimte die mannen en vrouwen uit verschillende families hebben om elkaar te ontmoeten. Vrouwen nemen in en door die beperkte ruimte de verantwoordelijkheid om een geschikte bruid voor hun mannelijke familieleden te vinden.

Wihdat heeft voor Palestijnen en Syriërs een verschillende betekenis en daarom ook een verschillende invloed op hun huwelijkspraktijken. Wihdat is een belangrijke identiteitsbaken voor de Palestijnse inwoners. Zij koppelen de regels rond verloving en huwelijksregistratie aan een specifieke kampidentiteit. Daarentegen vinden Syrische inwoners die verschillende huwelijkspraktijken van hun thuisland gewend zijn het soms lastiger om zich aan te passen aan de huwelijksnormen en -verwachtingen binnen het kamp.

De specifieke historische en politieke context van de Palestijnse en Syrische aanwezigheid in Jordanië heeft ook invloed op huwelijkspraktijken. Het vooruitzicht op een terugkeer naar het thuisland (of juist een gebrek aan zulk vooruitzicht), de aard van ontheemding en de juridische status van vluchtelingen in Jordanië spelen allemaal een belangrijke rol. Palestijnen die al langer dan zeventig jaar zijn verbannen zijn gaan geloven dat hun toekomst in Jordanië ligt. Legaal en permanent verblijf is daarom een centraal element dat Palestijnen laten meewegen bij de keuze van hun huwelijkspartners: zij trouwen liever met een partner die de Jordaanse nationaliteit heeft. Daarentegen hoopten mijn Syrische ge-

sprekspartners, die een veel kortere geschiedenis van ontheemding hebben dan de Palestijnen, tijdens mijn onderzoek nog steeds op een einde aan de oorlog in Syrië en een spoedige terugkeer naar huis. Hoewel het ontbreken van een legale verblijfsstatus veel invloed had op hun dagelijkse leven, speelde het geen grote rol bij de keuze van huwelijkspartners. Hun focus lag op het trouwen met mede-Syriërs zodat het hele gezin weer samen naar Syrië terug zou kunnen keren zodra de oorlog aldaar voorbij is.

Een gedeelde nationale achtergrond is een ander centraal element in de keuze voor een huwelijkspartner. Voor Palestijnen is een huwelijk met een Egyptenaar of Syriër vaak onwenselijk, vanwege gepercipieerde verschillen in culturele achtergrond. Zij maken zich zorgen dat deze verschillen een negatieve invloed kunnen hebben op het huwelijk. Veel Palestijnen benadrukken daarentegen culturele overeenkomsten tussen zichzelf en die van Jordaniërs. Palestijnen vereenzelfen zich ook met de Palestijnse woonplaats van herkomst; men zoekt vaak bij voorkeur een partner uit die woonplaats. Omdat Syriërs in Jordanië meer verspreid wonen en in kleinere aantallen aanwezig zijn in Wihdat, voelen zij vaak affiniteit en vertrouwdheid met elke Syriër in Jordanië, ongeacht de woonplaats waar ze vandaan komen.

De genoemde factoren maken dus dat de Palestijnse en Syrische vluchtelingen verschillende huwelijksnormen en -praktijken er op nahouden. Wat zij veelal gemeen hebben, is hun visie op de basisvoorwaarden voor een succesvol huwelijk. Men gelooft in het algemeen dat huwelijkspartners elkaar goed moeten kennen en begrijpen voordat zij met elkaar trouwen. Veel inwoners van Wihdat bekritisieren daarom het gebrek aan ruimte voor mensen om elkaar te ontmoeten en leren kennen voordat ze met elkaar in het huwelijk treden.

Terwijl Palestijnen en Syriërs debatteren over de wenselijkheid van verschillende huwelijkspraktijken, richten veel Jordaanse en internationale ontwikkelingsorganisaties zich op de preventie van huwelijken met minderjarigen. Dit doen ze door te lobbyen voor juridische hervormingen en middels bewustwordingscampagnes. Deze organisaties bepleiten dat hun onderzoek uitwijst dat ontheemding een duidelijk, direct en voorspelbaar effect heeft op het huwelijk. Documenten die zij publiceren schetsen het beeld dat ontheemding in combinatie met armoede en lokale tradities tot huwelijken met minderjarige vluchtelingenmeisjes leidt.

Mijn onderzoek laat zien dat dit beeld niet overeenkomt met hoe vluchtelingen zelf huwelijkspraktijken zien en ervaren. Terwijl ontwikkelingsorganisaties de jonge leeftijd van bruiden graag aanwijzen als hoofdoorzaak van problematische huwelijken met minderjarigen, stellen mijn respondenten dat het succes van een huwelijk veeleer afhangt van de mate waarin bruid en bruidegom wederzijds begrip voor elkaar hebben. Bovendien laten mijn databronnen zien dat vrouwen niet altijd slachtoffer en mannen dader zijn. Vluchtelingenmeisjes beschouwen zichzelf

als actieve deelnemers aan hun huwelijk en proberen bewust en actief beperkingen die hen worden opgelegd te navigeren.

Ontwikkelingsorganisaties laten dus zien dat ze een beperkt begrip hebben van hoe vluchtelingen zelf huwelijkspraktijken bezien. Daardoor zijn de interventies die zij voorstellen vaak maar beperkt relevant voor de dagelijkse realiteit van vluchtelingen en slagen zij er niet in de meer fundamentele oorzaken van kwetsbaarheid onder vluchtelingen te agenderen en aan te pakken. Terwijl ze ten onrechte kwetsbaarheid in huwelijken associëren met de vrouw als slachtoffer, hebben ze evenzeer ten onrechte nauwelijks aandacht voor de complexe politieke en sociale oorzaken van die kwetsbaarheid.

In Wihdat bestaan de meeste projecten van ontwikkelingsorganisaties die zich richten op huwelijkspraktijken uit bewustmakingsworkshops. Deze workshops dienen informatie te verschaffen over internationaal recht dat onderen meer huwelijken op jonge leeftijd moet voorkomen. Vaak slaan deze workshops de plank mis en bereiken ze hun doelgroepen op onbedoelde manieren. Dat komt deels doordat degenen die de workshops geven de inhoud van hun werk aanpassen op basis van vooronderstellingen die zij hebben over de lokale bevolking - aannames die worden beïnvloed door lokale sociale en economische ongelijkheid.

Terwijl de informatie die de lokale bevolking krijgt tijdens deze workshops zelden invloed heeft op huwelijkspraktijken, bieden de workshops wel een plaats en moment aan Syrische en Palestijnse vrouwen om elkaar te ontmoeten, om met elkaar te socializen, en ook om samen na te denken over huwelijkspraktijken en mogelijke echtgenoten. De workshops zijn ontmoetingsplaatsen waar vrouwen bruiden buiten hun directe familienetwerk hopen te vinden voor hun zoon of broer. Werknemers van de centra waar de workshops worden gehouden worden bovendien gezien als autoriteit en daarom vaak gevraagd advies en ondersteuning te geven bij huwelijkszaken.

Een van de gevolgen van ontheemding is dat mensen ook hun sociale netwerken verliezen. Ik stel op basis van mijn onderzoek dat vluchtelingen ernaar streven om te trouwen om een nieuw sociaal netwerk op te bouwen in het land waar ze verblijven. Palestijnen leven in een langdurige staat van ontheemding. Zonder uitzicht op een nabije terugkeer naar Palestina en in het bezit zijnde van het Jordaanse staatsburgerschap, gaan ze ervan uit dat hun toekomst in Jordanië ligt en dat ze dus met behulp van een huwelijk aldaar een leven moeten opbouwen. Daarentegen hopen Syriërs zo snel mogelijk terug te keren naar hun moederland, zodra de oorlog daar voorbij is. In de tussentijd proberen ze hun leven in Jordanië te regelen en vorm te geven door middel van hun huwelijk.

Ontheemding en vluchtelingenschap worden vaak besproken als een statische, onveranderlijke toestand. Vluchtelingen hebben echter te maken met constant

veranderende omstandigheden en netwerken. Tijdens hun ontheemding ontwikkelen vluchtelingen onderlinge gevoelens van verbondenheid en een gezamenlijke identiteit. Ze vormen nieuwe banden met elkaar en met andere bevolkingsgroepen in het land waar ze verblijven. Dit soort verbindingen ontstaan mede in en rondom huwelijken. Door het huwelijk bouwen vluchtelingen hun sociale netwerken op-nieuw op, beginnen ze hun eigen families, en creëren ze een plek voor zichzelf. In plaats van narratieven te produceren die vluchtelingen (en met name meisjes) stereotyperen als passieve slachtoffers van huwelijkspraktijken, zoals veel ontwikkelingsorganisaties doen, laat dit proefschrift zien dat vluchtelingen weliswaar in precare omstandigheden leven, maar ook actief deelnemen aan nieuwe sociale netwerken en hun leven naar vermogen vormgeven.





This thesis investigates the interplay between displacement and marriage practices among Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Jordan. Processes of national identification, belonging, and citizenship rights impact marriage practices, and do so differently depending on the particular displacement history of refugees. The thesis problematizes the narrative of international development organizations that mainly link displacement to the practice of early marriage, of which young girls are presented as the ultimate victims. The research shows that while refugee families are vulnerable in the face of displacement and poverty, refugee girls consider themselves active participants in their marriages and they together with their families employ agentive abilities in navigating their precarious legal and economic conditions. The analysis of the data also demonstrates that one cannot target the young girls without targeting the structural conditions they face. While the projects these organizations implement locally aim at raising awareness around 'negative' marriage practices, their main role lies in providing for semi-public female spaces at local centres that become one of the places available to women to search for brides for their male relatives. These centres thus become embedded in local matchmaking practices and in the social fabric of refugees. This thesis also brings forth the aspirational aspect of marriages in displacement ignored in development narratives. Marriages play a central role in rebuilding social networks and creating a sense of home, areas that are gravely impacted by war and displacement. Investigating marriage practices among Palestinians and Syrians in Jordan shows the ways refugees navigate their uncertain and precarious conditions, while simultaneously shaping their environment and working towards improving their lives.

