'Life Is Tight Here'

Displacement and Desire amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan

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Abstract: Since the civil war began in 2011, 5.5 million Syrians have fled their home country and are now living as refugees. Building upon anthropological studies of precarity, the article draws upon 14 months of person-centered ethnographic fieldwork to examine the contextual specificities of Syrian women's protracted displacement in Jordan. By foregrounding bodily experience as described by three interlocutors during person-centered interviews, the article considers how subjectivities are reshaped under such conditions. The narratives analysed here illustrate how the precarity of displacement fosters an embodied sense of tightness, constriction and stagnation while reconfiguring temporal horizons and rendering visions of imagined futures increasingly myopic.

Keywords: desire, displacement, embodiment, precarity, refugees, reproduction, subjectivity, temporality

Since the civil war began in 2011, 5.5 million Syrians have fled their home country and are now living as refugees. Jordan, specifically, hosts more than 600,000 displaced Syrians. The majority of Syrians in Jordan fled their home provinces of Dara'a, Homs and Damascus during the early stages of the conflict and have resided in Jordan for several years, largely in the Jordanian governorates of Irbid, Ramtha and Amman (Şahin Mencütek 2018). More than 80 per cent of Syrian refugees within Jordan live outside of official camps and are largely scattered throughout the urban areas of Irbid, Ramtha, and Amman.

The vast majority of Syrians displaced by the conflict doubt that they will be able to return to their home country while the Assad regime remains in power. Given the Syrian government's mandatory requirement of military service for all young men, families fear that their sons and husbands would be drafted in

a time of nationwide instability. Others have been blacklisted by the regime for their alleged involvement in the anti-government uprisings and would be at risk of arrest upon crossing the border. Furthermore, many have learned from friends and relatives remaining in Syria that the homes and property they left behind were destroyed or seized by the army during the war. In addition, years of conflict have disrupted local economies and infrastructure, making it impossible to earn a living. Extended family members remaining in Dara'a, for example, struggle to access safe drinking water, and report frequent blackouts with only a few hours of electricity each day.

During the early years of the Syrian War, Jordan sought to meet the immediate needs of vast numbers of the acutely displaced in partnership with multilateral organisations like the United Nations. In contrast, today, policies and aid programmes are faced with a very different, longer-term challenge: integrating a displaced population into the already-struggling national economy and systems of education, healthcare and social assistance. In these circumstances, the conceptual distinction between humanitarian and development aid has become increasingly less clear, as efforts to address the complex needs of Syrian refugees are integrated into large-scale programmes – sponsored by multilateral agencies like USAID (United States Agency for International Development), UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) – to promote Jordan's economic and human development.

Initiatives to increase Syrian women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services are embedded within longer-term interventions that seek to promote women's empowerment, increase demand for family planning services and reduce the national fertility rate – a strategy that development economists suggest will assuage the country's economic woes and reduce unemployment (USAID SHOPS 2015). Within development discourse, the high fertility rate amongst Syrian women in Jordan (4.7) compared to that of Jordanian women (2.6) has become an object of concern and investigation (DOS 2019). Nationwide surveys have sought to quantify factors that may contribute to high fertility such as healthcare access barriers, religious beliefs, a male partner's objection to contraception, and concerns or misconceptions about contraceptive side effects (USAID JCAP 2016). These hegemonic discourses implicitly construct Syrian women's high fertility as a problem that stems from *lack*: a lack of healthcare access, a lack of agency within the marital relationship and a lack of education or knowledge about contraceptive methods.

At the same time, anthropologists have sought to ethnographically illustrate the complex social milieu in which reproductive decisions are made (Chalmiers 2020; Fordyce 2012; Greil and McQuillan 2010; Johnson-Hanks 2005; Maternowska 2006; Singer 2018), complicating the assumptions that inform development organisations' analyses of fertility behaviour. Several have focussed specifically on Middle Eastern (Inhorn 1996, 2012; Inhorn et al.

2012; Sieverding et al. 2019; Tober et al. 2006) and Muslim (Johnson-Hanks 2006; Varley 2012) populations. Marcia Inhorn specifically points out that despite the ‘obsessive and rather narrow demographic focus . . . [on] population growth’, policy-makers and multinational development organisations have rarely considered the *why* of wanting children, or what Inhorn refers to as ‘child desire’ (1996: 230). This article builds upon this work by asking how such desire is articulated and negotiated in the context of displacement. The ethnographic narratives discussed here illustrate how reproductive subjectivities come to be shaped by women’s desires and the precarity that characterises their material life circumstances after displacement.

A Desire-Centered Phenomenology of Displaced Subjectivities

This article explores Syrian refugee women’s subjective and embodied experiences of displacement in Jordan. Here I consider how women’s narratives of reproductive life in Jordan reflect a larger, existential sense of constraint and limitation that – for my interlocutors – characterises their daily lived experience of displacement. As I collected women’s accounts of reproductive decision-making during my fieldwork, I came to see how such accounts emphasised not only the common structural barriers they must contend with as refugees but also a shared, embodied feeling of ‘tightness’ and stagnancy. But amidst these feelings of constriction, displaced Syrian refugee women in Jordan also expressed strong desires and aspirations to raise families that reflected their ideals of what constitutes a ‘good life’ (Deneulin 2017).

Following Sherry Ortner, I understand subjectivity as ‘the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth’ that shapes embodied and existential experience (2005: 37). I frame this project as an elaboration of displaced subjectivities following the insights of Good and colleagues, who suggest in *Postcolonial Disorders* that attention to subjectivity illuminates the connections between ‘national and global economic and political processes’ and ‘the most intimate forms of everyday experience’ (2008: 2–3). While Ortner’s definition allows us to understand which aspects of individual lived experience might be captured through a focus on subjectivity, recent work by Biehl and colleagues emphasises that subjectivity also represents ‘the ground on which a long series of historical changes and moral apparatuses coalesce’, creating ‘new forms of desire that . . . structure alternative ways of feeling and living’ (2007: 3–4).

Building upon these insights, this article forwards a novel framework of ‘desire-centered phenomenology’, drawing upon the work of Eve Tuck (2009) and Yen Le Espiritu and Lan Duong (2018). Tuck calls for ‘desire-centered research’ as an antidote to the academic tendency to represent oppressed communities as damaged and perpetually lacking, while Espiritu and Duong similarly urge scholars to embrace critical methodologies that reflect ‘refugees’

rich . . . complicated lives [and] the ways in which they enact their hopes [and] beliefs' (2018: 588) even in situations of extreme hardship. By asking interlocutors to articulate their hopes and aspirations for the future, a desire-centered phenomenology seeks to problematise narratives that define refugees by what they *lack* and to counter hegemonic representations of refugees as victims without agency that dominate popular media. This paradigm eschews the problematic tendency of scholarship on gendered lived experience in the Muslim world to employ a narrow analytic that views agency only in binary terms of resistance to either patriarchy or Western imperialism (Abu-Lughod 2002). Instead, this analysis foregrounds subjectivity and embodied experience in order to describe 'forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms' (Mahmood 2011: 9). Tuck's (2009) desire-centered framework thus complements the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in its attention to agency not solely as resistance to power exerted upon the individual, but as the individual's inherent active orientation towards the world as a desiring subject.

From the standpoint of phenomenology, existence is characterised by intentionality, that is, by a bodily sense of 'tending towards' the world (Csordas 2011: 139), through which meaning is constituted. The body can thus be considered the fundamental medium of desire. At the same time, unlike needs – which are defined by immediate, urgent bodily sensations such as hunger or pain – desire necessarily extends beyond the acuity of the present moment into a distinct temporal elsewhere. Anthropologists have characterised humanitarian aid as governed by a 'politics of necessity' (Trapp 2016) that defines refugees as perpetually in need – as 'bare life' (Nikolopoulou et al. 2000) requiring material sustenance rather than as political subjects. A focus on desire rejects the reductive emphasis on refugees as 'needy' subjects and instead strives to take seriously the desires they articulate, including those that might be dismissed as frivolous or irrational in a humanitarian framework.¹

In the humanitarian context, refugee women's reproduction is most often discussed as a problem to be solved through targeted intervention, with a recent report noting that 'Syrian women are even more reluctant to accept modern methods of family planning than Jordanian women' (USAID SHOPS 2015: 26). The desire to mother many children is reduced to a 'reluctance' to use birth control rather than recognised as a valid aspiration and expression of agency. At the same time, reports that describe high fertility as a result of cultural factors and gender norms eclipse the interpretive agency women express when they choose to embrace or negotiate such norms in specific ways through their reproductive practices and desires.

The three women described here differ markedly in their reproductive desires. Rayan (age 24, mother of three daughters) hopes to build a large family but plans to continue spacing her births by two-year intervals in order to give each child the attention he or she deserves. Hiba (age 27, mother of two sons) wants to have more children, but her husband has refused due to the family's

financial situation. Walida (age 17, mother of one daughter and currently pregnant) would have preferred to delay her second pregnancy but was discouraged from using contraception by her husband. The ethnographic anecdotes below illustrate the variety of reproductive desires these three women express and demonstrate how such desires are shaped by the precarity of displacement. In attending to the complexity of the reproductive desires expressed in these narratives, the article seeks to counter reductive understandings of Syrian women's family-planning practices (or lack thereof) and illuminate the many factors underlying reproductive desires as they are articulated by women themselves.

Methods

I conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork with Syrian refugee women in the Jordanian cities of Amman, Irbid and Ramtha. This fieldwork was preceded by an additional 12 months of ethnography with Syrian refugee women living in San Diego, California (although the data from San Diego are not discussed here). My fieldwork in Jordan greatly benefitted from prior relationships I developed with Syrian families in San Diego. Participants in Jordan were recruited via snowball and convenience sampling through a network of initial contacts whom I was introduced to by friends and relatives now living in San Diego.

I conducted participant observation in homes, accompanied women on their visits to extended family members living throughout Jordan, and attended family celebrations such as weddings, engagements, circumcisions, and holiday meals. As much of my fieldwork was conducted during the day, I did not conduct interviews with husbands, who were working outside of the home and rarely present. I also conducted a series of person-centered interviews (Levy and Hollan 2015) with Syrian women, healthcare providers, and humanitarian workers. Person-centered methodologies and phenomenological analyses illuminate the ways in which the structural forces that produce the refugee as a legible subject become embodied by individuals, transforming concepts of self, person, and subjectivity. These interviews reveal the ways in which large-scale social transformations are embedded in the fabric of everyday lives. They allowed me to closely attend to the interpretive schemas (Lowe and Strauss 2018; Strauss 2018) employed by my interlocutors in describing their reproductive experiences. To protect the confidentiality of all participants, the names used here are pseudonyms. I conducted the interviews in Arabic. Given the significance placed on 'linguistic nuance' (Levy and Hollan 2015) in person-centered methodologies, I transcribed all interviews in Arabic with the help of a research assistant. I inductively coded Arabic transcripts in Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, and identified common themes.

I understand the narratives discussed here as a contextually specific product of the interactions between myself as a researcher and the women who

participated in my study, interactions that were deeply shaped by the power inequalities that characterised our relationships. This analysis thus asks how the desires women articulated during such interviews might tell us about their lived, embodied experiences of displacement without assuming that such narratives are neutral representations of some static, internal reality. In doing so, I attend to desires as open, shifting, inherently subjective entities while recognising the ways in which experiences and expressions of desire are necessarily shaped by the inter-subjective context of the interview and the dynamics of the relationship between researcher and participant.

In what follows, I focus on person-centered ethnographic interviews conducted with three women – Rayan, Walida and Hiba – all of whom resided with their families in the rural areas of Dara'a Province prior to the war in Syria. Their families in Dara'a owned land and large homes, and male members of the family worked as carpenters, electricians or merchants. Some owned small businesses and stores in nearby towns. Families survived and often thrived on relatively modest incomes, my interlocutors explained, because, as homeowners, their living expenses were minimal. Wealth acquired over generations was invested in land and property. When families were forced to migrate to Jordan to escape the conflict, these significant assets were lost. This sense of loss and dispossession appears as a central theme in the narratives discussed here.

While all three women shared similar regional and class backgrounds, several significant differences have shaped their lived experiences as refugees in Jordan. Rayan and Hiba were in consanguineous marriages and had married their first cousins in 2011 at the ages of 15 and 19, respectively. Both became pregnant shortly after marriage and, less than a year after the wedding, found themselves fleeing the escalating conflict in Dara'a during their first pregnancies. Walida, in contrast, was married at the age of 15 after living in Jordan for several years. Her husband was also from Dara'a but was not a member of her extended family.

Embodied Experiences of Displacement: Tightness and Constraint

The narrative excerpts below took place during longer conversations about reproductive life and its challenges. Throughout the interviews, the women often spoke at length about the impact of economic hardship on nearly every aspect of their lives. This in itself is, of course, unsurprising; the financial struggles displaced Syrians face in Jordan and around the globe have been well documented (Chatty 2017; Kelberer 2017; UNICEF 2020). Yet these narratives also point to the ways in which the material reality of precarity shapes embodied experience and how, in turn, bodily experiences of constraint (*dīq*), immobility (*al-waḍ' dāqir*) and material scarcity (*hirmān*) are associated with the

truncated temporal horizon that characterises displacement. These material and existential conditions overwhelmingly define the environment in which reproductive desires emerge.

Rayan

For example, during our first interview, Rayan described the difficulties of life in Jordan (*al-ḥayāt ḍayyīq hūn*) as a refugee raising three children. The interview took place in her mother's home in East Amman, which included three bedrooms, a kitchen, one bathroom and a sitting room. Though the space currently served as a residence for eight individuals, for several years after their arrival in Jordan, Rayan, her husband Hassan, and her eldest daughter had lived with Rayan's parents and siblings. At that time, the three-bedroom home served as the primary residence for a total of 11 individuals: six adults, three adolescents and two young children. Recently, she and her husband had started renting a neighbouring two-bedroom apartment for their nuclear family of five – an ideal living situation towards which nearly every woman I met aspired.

Rayan had married her husband in early 2011 and had left their home in rural Dara'a with him later that same year, when she was four months pregnant. During her first and second pregnancies, she and her husband had lived with her family, who had also fled Syria for Jordan after the conflict began. When I asked her to describe how she had experienced these pregnancies, she emphasised how emotionally difficult they had been for her:

The first thing was that we were living in my family's home and the home is so tight (*al-dār ḍayyīqah*). Here it's so cramped (*ḍayyīq hūn*). [When I was pregnant] with my first two daughters, you know, I would start crying without a reason because life is tight here (*al-ḥayāt ḍīq hūn*). There wasn't any work for my husband; we were living in my family's home, I mean here in my family's home. I didn't have a house to myself like I have now. We couldn't go out – there wasn't money to go out.

Later in the conversation, she described her husband Hassan's desire to eventually join his brother in Germany:

My husband Hassan wants to go [to Germany] where his brother Mohammed has been living . . . There are a lot of Syrians there [in Germany] who travelled from here because they say that here the situation is, you know, very tight (*ḍayyīq qad ḥālo*) . . . and here we don't have the things that people need: education, money to pay rent, and things like that.

Rayan's narrative illustrates the multiple facets of precarity she has experienced after displacement by describing life in Jordan as *ḍayyīq*, an Arabic word that typically means tight or narrow and, in some instances, cramped, confined, limited or restricted (Kaye 1977).

Yet, for Rayan, the embodied sense of tightness she refers to is not solely a result of her cramped living quarters but equally a consequence of her

husband's unemployment and their financial struggles. Her comments portray her daily life experiences as characterised by an embodied sense of being constrained, even confined to her home and unable to 'go out' because there simply 'wasn't money' (*'mā fī maṣāri'*). Though economic hardship has surely created numerous challenges for her family, for Rayan the most noteworthy of them all is the inability to go out of the house. Her continual references to feelings of 'tightness' seem to reflect a bodily sense of being constrained that, for Rayan, dwarfed the other obstacles she had undoubtedly faced. Even at the time of the interview, though her financial situation had marginally improved, she mentioned that her husband's monthly salary of 300 Jordanian dinars (approximately \$420 US dollars) was often barely enough to cover the cost of transportation to his workplace, the monthly rent for their apartment and the cost of food, despite the ten dinars per person in food aid that they received every month from the United Nations.

Despite these difficult circumstances, Rayan hoped to slowly create a large family similar to the one she had grown up in with four sisters and two brothers. She and her husband planned to continue spacing her pregnancies and maintain a minimum period of two years between each birth. Spacing her births in this way, she explained, not only was important for her own physical health but also allowed each child 'to be spoiled a little, with his mother focussed only on him'. While timing and spacing her births is important to Rayan, her reproductive desires go beyond planning pregnancy and reflect her aspirations towards particular ideals of motherhood and intention to mother in specific ways.

Walida

The crowded living conditions Rayan described were typical for the families and women I interviewed. Walida, who lived with her husband and her in-laws in Ramtha, was happy to be pregnant with her second child, yet also expressed ambivalence about the stress a newborn would add to a living situation that was already a significant source of discomfort for her:

I was happy [when I found out I was pregnant] but afraid of how tired I will be – I mean there's my daughter, there's morning sickness, and the home – you see I live with my in-laws – not on my own. A woman in her own home can relax (*al-waḥidah bi dārha btirtāh*). You see this? [gesturing to her hijab]. I don't take it off, you know.

For Walida and several other participants who shared a home with their in-laws, the only place where they felt comfortable and were able to relax (*btirtāh*) was in the bedroom, a space usually shared by members of the same nuclear family. As she mentions, the bedroom was also the only place where hijab-wearing Muslim women take off the loose, hooded tunics typically worn in front of male in-laws. Although every woman I interviewed wore a hijab and

many lived with their in-laws, Walida was the only person to highlight this dynamic in discussions about the challenges of life in Jordan.

Walida shared one room with her husband and daughter, while the other bedroom was occupied by her brother-in-law, his wife and their daughter. Her mother and sister-in-law slept on cushions in the salon. This living situation, Walida explained, was the greatest difficulty of her marriage:

The only thing I'm not comfortable with is that I'm in my in-laws' home – like my mother-in-law and her daughter and my sister-in-law [are all here] – I don't relax. I want to be starting out on my own, more relaxed, you know what I mean? [Now that I'm pregnant] . . . I'll start suffering again, another kid will come into my life to dress, to change, to wipe, to feed, and I'll have two. How will I raise them?

Walida contrasted her current pregnancy with her first, emphasising that the former had been much harder on her both physically and emotionally. She described her first pregnancy as characterised by *ḍagħṭ* – pressure or stress – that she attributed to her living situation. Though she expressed apprehension about the labour associated with raising another child – dressing him, feeding him, changing him, etc. – it seems as if the common challenges associated with pregnancy and motherhood were exacerbated for Walida because her living situation remained a source of so much discomfort and tension for her. Unlike Rayan, who articulated very specific hopes for her reproductive future, Walida seemed less invested in realising particular plans for her pregnancies and more concerned with finding solutions to the most immediate source of her discomfort: a cramped living situation.

Hiba

On the other hand, Hiba, who lived with her husband and his family in Irbid, seemed quite at ease in her in-laws' home and never mentioned her living situation as a source of stress, though it was quite similar to Walida's, at least in a material sense. However, unlike Walida, who had married outside her extended family, both Rayan and Hiba were married to their first cousins, a common practice in their native region of Dara'a, and had known their in-laws well prior to their marriages. Back in Dara'a, Hiba explained, she would have liked to have had a large family with many children. However, given the challenges of life after displacement in Jordan, she only wound up having two children, as she explained:

[Now that we're in Jordan,] small families are better. You know, life is hard. God, it's hard. There's no work and there's no money . . . My husband says, if I want to have lots of kids, where will I get money to spend on them? How will I clothe them and provide for them? They need to read, to wear clothes, to eat, I mean, doesn't a baby need diapers and milk? Everyone says in this crisis (*azmah*) that two children are enough – there isn't money and everything costs money. And there's no work. The situation is *dāqir* [stagnant, stuck].

Hiba describes life in Jordan as defined by immobility through her use of the word *dāqir*, meaning ‘stuck’ or ‘stagnant’ and conveying a complete lack of motion. Both women use words that imply some sort of physical constraint or imposed immobility (*dāqir*, stuck, or *ḍayyiq*, tight) to describe the material scarcity that, for them, characterises life after displacement and structures their reproductive decisions. Throughout our conversations, she explained and agreed with her husband’s desire to prevent pregnancy given their economic situation. At the same time, she expressed regret that their current circumstances prevented her from realising her desire to bear many children and mother a large family.

Rayan, continued

In such circumstances, unexpected expenses could easily upend any precarious semblance of financial stability. Such was the case for Rayan and Hassan, who had managed to establish some stability for their family over the last two years in Jordan. Hassan is employed at a clothing store, where he makes, as mentioned above, 300 dinars per month (approximately 420 dollars). However, though the Jordanian government has eased restrictions on refugees’ employment and issued 176,920 work permits² to Syrians living in the country between January 2016 and December 2019, Hassan has continued to work without a permit. One of Rayan’s biggest fears was that he might be caught working illegally and deported to Syria. I asked her what prevented him from obtaining a permit, and she explained:

My husband won’t do it. He said 50 dinars [the cost of the permit]³ pays half of our monthly rent. Every expense is calculated – every lira is accounted for (*kul lira maḥsūba*) – for rent, for busses, for taxis, if my husband returns late at night from work – for the girls’ expenses.

It’s important to note that – with a total monthly income of 300 dinars plus 50 dinars in food aid (approximately 500 dollars) – Rayan and her family are actually living just above the national poverty line of 68 dinars (96 dollars) per month per person (UNICEF 2020). Though she and Hassan struggle financially, they are statistically better off than most Syrian refugees, 78 per cent of whom live below Jordan’s national poverty line (UNICEF 2020).

The precarity of their financial situation became even more apparent as we discussed her previous pregnancies. During the second trimester of her second pregnancy, she had been diagnosed with placenta previa during an ultrasound at a private clinic – a condition that can lead to severe bleeding and is associated with maternal and foetal mortality, especially in situations where access to healthcare is limited. She had been strongly advised to regularly attend all of her upcoming prenatal appointments but, given the challenging circumstances of her daily life in Jordan, was unable to return for follow-up

care until she began bleeding in her ninth month of pregnancy. After arriving at the local clinic, the physician instructed her to go to the hospital. Rayan returned to the private hospital where she had given birth to her first daughter. Like most women I interviewed, despite her difficult financial situation, Rayan chose to seek prenatal care and deliver at a private facility in order to avoid the public healthcare sector, which has a reputation for being unsanitary and providing a low quality of care.

After arriving at the hospital, Rayan was told that she might need a caesarean section because of the position of the placenta. Shortly afterwards, the hospital staff made a mistake (*ṣār m'hum khaṭ'a hunāk, kharbatū*) and performed an internal examination to check her cervical dilation, a procedure which is contraindicated for patients with confirmed or even suspected placenta previa. Following the exam, she began bleeding heavily and the foetus started to show signs of distress. An emergency caesarean section – the doctor explained to Hassan – was necessary to save Rayan's life as well as her unborn daughter's. However, at a private hospital, a caesarean would cost 500 dinars – nearly two months' worth of income. Hassan asked if there was any way the surgery could be delayed and Rayan could be transferred to another, cheaper hospital, explaining to the staff that they simply did not have 500 dinars. After the staff clarified the extreme urgency of the situation, Hassan agreed to the surgery. Several days later, Rayan explained to me, she and her daughter were ready to be discharged but were unable to leave the hospital until the bill had been paid. Hassan travelled throughout Amman, borrowing small amounts of cash from his friends until he finally had enough to pay the bill, which had reached a total of 550 dinars after Rayan required two blood transfusions.

Two years later, during Rayan's third pregnancy, she was diagnosed as anaemic. She recalled that her haemoglobin was only 8.0, a value which would indicate quite significant anaemia. Her doctor recommended a series of intravenous iron infusions, which would each cost 17 dinars (approximately 24 dollars). Since Rayan and her husband had just barely managed to pay off the debt they incurred from her caesarean, she decided to forgo the infusions.

The everyday challenges that characterise the precarity of life after displacement, as Georgina Ramsay (2020) suggests, constrict temporal horizons, severing the ties that tethered once-imagined futures to the reality of the present. A memorable exchange with Rayan rendered these connections starkly apparent. To conclude our first interview, I had asked her what her hopes were for her daughters in the future (*shū bidik li binātik b-al-mustaqbal?*). She replied immediately:

You know, now my daughter is wanting – she's telling me 'Mama, bring me a bicycle to play on'. I can't because there's no room in the house – it's just two rooms, because we can't pay rent for more than that. There's no money for me to buy her a bicycle . . . We aren't able to bring them what they want. The girls are really deprived (*mahrūmāt*) here.

Her response surprised me. I had intended to ask what she hoped her daughters' lives might look like in 10 or 20 years as young women. Yet Rayan interpreted this word (*al-mustaqbal*) differently, as referring to the immediate future, and described what – at its surface – appears to be a basic material need or desire.

Material scarcity structures not only the embodied experience of the present but also constrains once-expansive realms of future possibility, realms now narrowly defined by the precarious reality of the immediate present. Rayan's response reveals that her embodied experiences of tightness, constraint and constriction are profoundly intertwined with her family's financial struggles as well as her maternal and reproductive desires. Under such conditions, her vision of possible futures for herself and her family becomes increasingly myopic, as she and her husband try to anticipate and budget for unexpected expenses. The immediate context of precarity that defines her material circumstances constrains and truncates temporal projections of possible futures.

At the same time, Rayan seemed to view our interviews as a chance to inform a larger audience about the difficulties Syrian refugees continue to face nearly a decade after their displacement. Like most of my interlocutors, she initially assumed that, as a White American woman, I must have connections to the many foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that continue to provide aid to Syrians in Jordan and that I might be able to negotiate additional assistance for her family. Yet, even after I emphasised that I was not associated with any NGO and could not provide connections to aid beyond helping her fill out applications, she remained adamant in her conviction that more aid would be provided on a larger scale if the world knew the reality she and others like her faced on a daily basis.

Displacement and Desire

Anthropologists have sought to understand how individual subjectivities are transformed by the increasingly common state of displacement (Abusharaf 2009; Barber and Lem 2018; Brun 2016; El-Shaarawi 2015; Greene 2020; Horton 2009; J. H. Jenkins 1991; Volk 2009). These authors have characterised – in various contexts – the affective experiences of immobility, 'waiting' (Elliot 2016), being 'stuck', or indefinitely 'in transit' (El-Shaarawi 2015). Building upon this literature, others have attempted to articulate how the state of displacement itself must be understood as not only a geographic dislocation but also a temporal dispossession (Ramsay 2019) that disrupts 'the teleology of life' and 'pulls a person out of the illusory comfort of . . . stability and into a reality of a future that is not only uncertain, but which is determined by forces that are outside of their direct control' (2019: 4).

The state of displacement has been theorised as fundamentally a state of precarity (Baban et al. 2017; Dewey et al. 2018; J. Jenkins 2015; Suerbaum

2017). Drawing upon Anna Tsing's (2019) earlier articulation of precarity as 'life without the promise of stability', Ramsay emphasises the temporal dimensions of precarity, arguing that 'the inclusion of the term "promise" . . . attaches temporality to the theorization, recognizing that precarity is not simply a state of contemporary insecurity but a projection of continuous instability into the future' (2019: 16). This temporal aspect of precarity deeply shapes the affective experience of displacement – a state which, Ramsay suggests, disrupts imagined life trajectories, pulling once-distant future horizons closer, and renders the transcendent, aspiring subject myopic and immanent. If transcendental subjectivities are characterised by their ability to envision and pursue desired futures, displaced subjectivities are shaped by the fundamental conditions of uncertainty, instability and precarity that 'make the future seem impossible to navigate, and the present unable to be aligned with an aspired towards or projected future' (Ramsay 2019: 16).

The embodied feeling of tightness (*al-hayāt dīq hūn*) that Rayan describes not only seems to refer to her physical surroundings and the practical challenges of life in close quarters, it evokes an existential sense of constriction that narrows and confines possible imagined futures to the urgent, immediate needs of the present. This sense of tightness and constriction was similarly referenced by Yemeni immigrant women living in San Francisco during ethnographic interviews conducted by Lucia Volk (2009). These women also used a derivative of the Arabic word *dīq* to characterise the embodied experience of life in apartments that were not only 'too small . . . but also inappropriately designed for women to receive guests according to Yemeni rules of hospitality that require that men and women are received and hosted separately' (2009: 406). Thus, the 'tightness' of life after displacement referenced not only a bodily sense of narrowness and physical constraint but also encompassed experiences of profound social isolation and loneliness that resulted, in part, from the 'size and architectural challenges of their apartments' (2009: 406–407).

In Jordan, needs assessments conducted by various NGOs discuss the issues of unstable housing, crowded living conditions and high rental expenses. For instance, a report by CARE International (2014) noted that Syrians in Jordan report that their single most pressing need is rental assistance. The narratives discussed here might seem to provide illustrations of the most obvious obstacle faced not only by Syrians but by many Jordanians as well. However, an ethnographic focus on displacement illuminates central aspects of lived experience that are eclipsed by the approach and paradigm of a needs assessment. When Rayan, Hiba and Walida told me again and again about the discomfort provoked by their living situations, they seemed to be articulating a larger sense of dispossession that goes beyond the stress of staying within a tight monthly budget. While their comments certainly do reflect their near-constant struggle to afford monthly rental payments, they also must be understood in relation to the lives and homes they left behind in Syria – in a context where home ownership serves as the foundation for financial security. For example, when Rayan

emphasised that, here in Jordan, ‘every lira is accounted for’, she was not only articulating a need for economic stability but also, implicitly, contrasting the tight budget her family struggled to balance after displacement with the flexibility afforded to her family as home owners back in Syria. When describing life in Dara’a, she fondly recalled the wide-open spaces and country roads that led into town. In comparison, the city of Amman lacked the expansiveness present in her recollections of her hometown, where she had enjoyed walking outside on a near-daily basis. She rarely walked around her neighbourhood in East Amman, she explained to me, because of the steep hills that made even short walks exhausting.

Yet, though the ethnographic data discussed here reflect a shared sense of constriction that, as several anthropologists have observed, characterises many refugees’ embodied experiences, in her theorisation of displacement as temporal dispossession, Ramsay cautions against the tendency to exceptionalise displaced states as fundamental departures from the precarity of late capitalism. Instead, she encourages anthropologists to ‘recognise the specificity of refugee and migrant experiences without foreclosing their experiences as isolated’ (2019: 19) or unique. In doing so, we come to recognise that the ‘temporal rhythm of persistent crisis . . . is far from unique to refugees’ (2019: 20) and reflects a shared ‘temporality . . . under the conditions of a rapidly changing and expanding world that deprives people (especially, but not only, poor people) of many of the grounds of certainty that existed in a smaller and slower world’ (Schielke 2015: 23).

Thus, while the narratives analysed here reflect the contextual specificities of Rayan’s, Hiba’s and Walida’s everyday lives in Jordan, they do not describe a condition that is unique only to Syrians or even refugees more generally. Person-centered ethnography’s close focus on a single individual’s experience illuminates both these contextual specificities and, at the same time, depicts how global economic structures are manifest in everyday lived experiences of precarity, experiences that are far from unique to refugees. As such, this ethnography adopts the perspective of ‘critical refugee studies’, an interdisciplinary field defined by Yen Le Espiritu which ‘conceptualizes “the refugee” not as an object of investigation but rather as a paradigm “whose function [is] to establish and make intelligible a wider set of problems”’ (2014: 10).

Worldwide, the conditions of late capitalism have led to an unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the global elite. Most others subsist in a tenuous state of precarity, in which one’s livelihood and well-being are perpetually at risk. The stories of refugees like Rayan, Walida and Hiba reveal how easily stable lives of comfort and even relative prosperity can be upended and destroyed by a single calamitous event – violent conflict, natural disaster or economic crisis. Samuli Schielke, for instance, defines wealth as a state of ‘existential comfort’ (2015: 118), a comfort made possible by the knowledge that one has sufficient resources to withstand nearly any unexpected hardship or catastrophe. The embodied sense of tightness and constraint experienced by

my interlocutors perhaps thus reflects the existential *discomfort* of precarity, in which 'every lira' must be accounted for. When Rayan articulates her desire to buy bicycles for her daughters, I suggest that she is expressing a more profound longing for the existential comfort she enjoyed as a member of a landowning family back in Syria, when she had not yet been forced to face the stark reality of precarity that defines most lives in late capitalism, a precarity threatening to undermine any sense of 'existential comfort'.

For Schielke, late capitalist subjects are always 'living in the future tense' (2015: 125), in which the present is defined by pressing future obligations: rent, debt and instalment payments. It seems as if this is the temporal elsewhere that Rayan imagined when asked about her daughters' future in a present that is defined by the constant pressure of upcoming expenses. The narratives discussed here illustrate how the precarity of displacement is experienced by my interlocutors as an overwhelming, bodily sense of tightness or constriction. Everyday lived experiences of scarcity, in turn, contribute to a sense of temporal dispossession (Ramsay 2019), in which the desiring subject becomes displaced from once-imagined futures. The precarity of the everyday thus temporally constrains aspirations to the most immediate future.

While the ever-present hardships of displacement and material scarcity contribute to a sense of tightness, constriction and limited possibility, even within this context refugee women refuse to be reduced to subjects defined by *lack*. Both Rayan and Hiba often express their desire to mother large families and lament the ways in which the precarity of displacement has constrained their ability to fulfil such aspirations. Crucially, these reproductive desires are not only about family size but also about the type of mother each woman hopes to become – one who can, for example, indulge her children's wishes for bicycles, providing them with a good life that is defined by more than the immediacy of their material needs and defying the 'politics of necessity' that structures humanitarian practice (Trapp 2016).

As Miriam Ticktin (2011) and Didier Fassin (2011) demonstrate, humanitarianism's most central principle is the moral obligation to relieve human suffering through interventions designed to meet the most urgent, immediate needs of the displaced. The humanitarian system is thus premised upon the presence of a suffering individual – someone *in need*. As Micah Trapp (2016) illustrates through his ethnographic fieldwork with Liberian refugees in Ghana, the distinction between *need* and *desire* remains a core mechanism through which humanitarianism functions as a disciplinary apparatus. Though the bland food rations provided by international agencies met standard nutritional requirements, their tastelessness rendered them ultimately unsatisfying for refugees who – rejecting the humanitarian logic of necessity – demanded meals that not only met their caloric needs but also satisfied their desires for gustatory pleasure. The logic of necessity is intertwined with the utilitarian principle of cost-efficiency: funders seek to maximise their impact by meeting the most urgent needs of as many people as possible. Implicit within this

model is the imperative for recipients to demonstrate gratitude, an affective orientation that is in some ways precluded by desire. To express desire – for tasty food or a larger family – is to reject one's interpellation as a needy subject whose gratitude renders her or him content with mere subsistence.

In the same way, my interlocutors continued to present themselves as *desiring subjects*, who do not uncritically embrace the imperative to limit the size of their families given the hardships of life after displacement. In doing so, they refuse to internalise the cost-efficiency imperative that undergirds humanitarian logic. Instead, they articulate aspirations for their lives that exceed mere subsistence and voice complex desires that cannot be reduced to bare needs.

Conclusion

Reproductive desires are moulded by a multiplicity of factors that are rarely captured in quantitative studies of fertility behaviour. Such studies often fail to represent the active, aspirational, desiring subjectivities that serve as the foundation of reproductive life and decision-making. Though it is never stated quite so bluntly, the reader of these reports gets the implicit sense that refugee women continue to bear children against their own best interest either because they do not know any better or because they are forced to pursue pregnancy to meet their husbands' and in-laws' expectations within a larger pronatalist culture and religion. While there are, of course, women across the globe – including Syrian women – whose reproductive lives are shaped by force or coercion, this article seeks to reveal the desiring subjectivities that are so rarely captured by quantitative surveys and problem-based approaches to the study of reproduction.

Though the specific desires of each woman described here differ in many ways, all are nonetheless shaped by a common embodied experience of tightness and constraint that arises within the precarity that characterises life after displacement. At the same time, reproductive desires are constricted – not defined – by experiences of material scarcity and hardship. The articulation of desires that go beyond material subsistence in many ways contradicts the logic of necessity that undergirds humanitarian practice. Women are not content to merely meet the basic needs of their current children and do not always conform to the expectation that, given the financial difficulties of refugee life, they will abandon their desires for large families and adopt the contraceptive methods freely provided by humanitarian actors in the region. Through a focus on women's desires, this article has attempted to show that – despite the precarity and hardship that characterise their everyday lives – women continue to envision and aspire towards particular forms of motherhood and illustrate how reproductive subjectivities are shaped by the embodied experience of displacement.

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Notes

1. For example, the desire for food that not only meets caloric needs but is satisfying and tasty, as discussed by Trapp (2016).
2. Permits are issued for a maximum of one year, and so many of these are actually renewals of temporary, short-term or yearly permits (Ministry of Labour 2017).
3. Contrary to what Rayan had heard, the employer – not the employee – is officially responsible for paying the five-dinar fee to obtain a work permit. Individuals employed in construction, however, are required to pay an additional 45 dinars to cover the cost of insurance upon issuance of the permit. Given that her husband had previously worked in construction, Rayan likely assumed that the cost for a permit remained the same.

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