SCULPTING IDENTITIES: ACCULTURATION AND GENDER DYNAMICS AMONG SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN RESETTLED IN SPAIN

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores the experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain after the 2011 conflict, focusing on their acculturation strategies and shifts in gender roles. Through semi-structured interviews with ten participants, analyzed using thematic analysis, the study identifies how factors such as age, marital status, education, religion, expectations, and pre-migration experiences shape acculturation. Biculturalism and cultural incorporation are linked to gender role shifts, while cultural maintenance and disengagement restrict them. Language acquisition significantly influences gender dynamics. The negotiation of gender roles and identities, particularly among younger refugees, is a complex process influenced by both cultural norms and newfound freedoms. The study challenges the idea of a uniform acculturation experience, emphasizing the need for tailored interventions that consider cultural backgrounds to create more inclusive reception programs for Syrian refugee women in Spain.*

KEYWORDS: *Syrian refugee women, acculturation strategies, gender roles, Spain*

INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict, which began in March 2011, led to a major refugee crisis, forcing millions to flee. While Germany remains the top destination for Syrian refugees in Europe (UNHCR 2023), Spain, governed by the Dublin Regulation III, requires refugees to remain in the country (Official Journal of the European Union 2013). Syrian refugees represent only a small share of Spain's refugee population

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(AIDA[2] 2022: 8). This study examines the diverse experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain applying a comprehensive migration framework. Utilizing acculturation theory alongside social identity and identity theories, we focus on how gender roles transform during acculturation. Our goals include exploring Syrian and Spanish gender roles, understanding how Syrian refugee women construct gender identities, and analyzing changes due to displacement and acculturation in Spain. Recognizing their non-Western origins, this study adopts a refugee-centric approach to highlight their unique experiences. The article covers the Syrian gender context, conceptual framework, methodology, and analysis of results.

UNVEILING GENDERED REALITIES IN SYRIA: LEGAL, SOCIAL, AND EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

In Syria, gender inequality and discrimination persist in legal, social, and educational spheres. Islamic jurisprudence, a key legislative source under the Syrian constitution (Maktabi 2010: 8), results in the *Personal Status Law* (PSL), which merges civil and Islamic principles, leading to gender disparities in religious court systems (Manea 2012; AlJazairi 2015: 348–349). Women face discrimination in marriage, citizenship, custody, and freedom of movement due to religious and cultural influences (Yahya 2010). Marriage requires guardians' consent, limiting women's autonomy (Khalid Tamym 2015: 336). Religious prohibitions on birth control make pregnancy a means of securing a husband's loyalty and male heirs. Additionally, Syrian women cannot confer nationality to children with non-Syrian spouses (Khwri–Hidiwah 2006), and travel needs spousal approval. Men can divorce unilaterally, while women encounter complex divorce proceedings (Yahya 2010: 931; Manea 2012: 2). Custody laws favor men, and the penal code permits "honor crimes" by male relatives (Aldoughli 2019).

While primary education is compulsory for both genders, cultural expectations limit women's access to higher education (ʿAraby 2008: 13), with men viewed as primary breadwinners (Khalid Tamym 2015: 332–333). Economic pressures drive early male workforce entry, encouraging child marriage in rural areas (Khwri–Hidiwah 2006). Women's workforce participation is hindered by the need for male guardians' approval and societal norms (Khalid Tamym 2015). Balancing work and motherhood often leads to women dropping out, and discrimination limits their roles, especially in politics (Abu-Hamdan–Dyaby 2020).

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2 The Dublin Regulation III (EU No 604/2013) determines which EU country is responsible for processing an asylum application.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: COMBINED ACCULTURATION THEORY AND THE SOCIAL IDENTITY MODEL OF IDENTITY CHANGE (SIMIC)

Acculturation is a transformative process arising from continuous contact between cultural groups (Redfield et al. 1936; Berry 1990, 1992, 1997; Ward 1996), involving sociocultural and psychological shifts (Berry 2003). The *behavioral shifts* perspective emphasizes stress-free cultural learning crucial for successful sociocultural adaptation (Berry 1980b), while the *affect* perspective addresses acculturative stress and the coping skills needed for psychological adaptation (Sam–Berry 2010). Ward and Kennedy (1999) found a positive correlation between sociocultural and psychological adaptation.

This study explores a less examined aspect of acculturation – sociocultural changes, specifically shifts in gender roles due to skill acquisition, and their potential to induce stress among refugees. We view these changes not only as adaptive skills but as transformative elements impacting the sociocultural structure of the 'Little Syria' community in the host society. Using both *behavioral shift* and *affect* perspectives, we investigate the complex nature of gender role evolution during acculturation.

We also focus on the agency of refugees in the acculturation process. As members of a non-dominant group, refugees' choices of acculturation strategies are influenced by the dominant culture. Berry's (1970, 1980a, 1990) strategies – integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization – are adjusted to highlight that refugees often lack the freedom to choose their paths (Berry 1970: 9). Therefore, terms like biculturalism, cultural incorporation, cultural maintenance, and cultural disengagement highlight the coexistence of both cultures. LaFromboise et al. (1993) introduced biculturalism to indicate nearly equal cultural coexistence during acculturation, aligning with the bicultural identity integration (BII) framework by Benet-Martínez, which examines how individuals perceive overlaps in their cultural identities. Those with high BII often see themselves as part of a "hyphenated culture" or a combined "third" culture (Benet-Martínez – Haritatos 2005).

Gordon (1964) adds depth with the concepts of structural assimilation (which measures the degree of contact and participation with the host culture) and cultural assimilation (which measures the degree of assimilation into the host culture). According to Berry, complete assimilation occurs when both forms are fully aligned. However, we recognize the improbability of achieving complete assimilation. Therefore, we propose "cultural incorporation" for high levels of both structural and cultural assimilation, "cultural maintenance" for situations where there is a low degree of contact and participation in the host society,

coupled with minimal cultural assimilation, allowing the culture of origin to predominate, and "cultural disengagement" for cases of minimal engagement with both cultures.

Figure 1. *The intersection of SIMIC and prior moderating factors during acculturation*
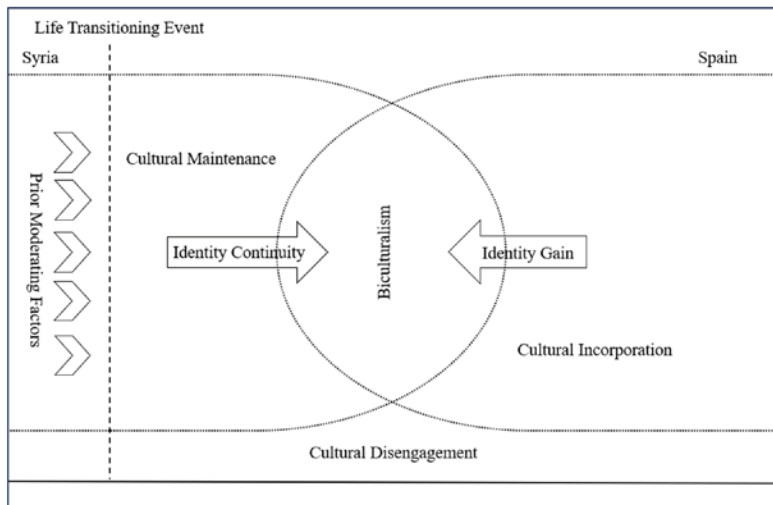
Source: Author's construction.

War-induced displacement places refugees in a multicultural context distinct from their origin, where gender roles differ significantly. Syrians, from a rigid cultural environment, face more flexible gender role definitions in Spain. This context necessitates adaptation, making gender identity more fluid (Haslam et al. 2008). By adopting a social identity change perspective, we emphasize the dynamic nature of self-definition, as individuals continuously evolve their sense of self (Turner et al. 1987) through social interactions and experiences. Specifically, we draw on the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) to understand how individuals' identities shift in response to group memberships and social comparisons (Iyer et al. 2009; Jetten et al. 2009). The model emphasizes balancing identity continuity and identity gain during acculturation (Ballentyne et al. 2021). Prior moderating factors such as age, gender, education, religion, health, language, marital status, motivation, expectations, and cultural distance also influence the acculturation process (Berry 1997, 2006; Masgoret–Ward 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study explores the experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with ten women from diverse Syrian regions now residing throughout Spain. Participants ranged in age (from under twenty to their fifties) and had varied marital statuses, educational backgrounds, and religious beliefs. They also differed in their experiences in Syria, during the war, and their transit journeys. Two interviews were conducted in the presence of the participants' husbands, which may have influenced the interview dynamics.

Participants were recruited via Facebook groups for Syrian refugees, using an initial post followed by snowball sampling. All participants were enrolled in Spain's Reception System program, managed by different NGOs under a government 'joint management' model (López-Sala – Godenau 2019). This program spans three phases – (1) initial assessment and referral, (2) reception, and (3) autonomy – lasting 18–24 months for vulnerable individuals (AIDA 2022). The initial assessment and referral phase (up to one month) offers basic services, the reception phase (six months, extendable) provides housing, allowances, and support services, and the autonomy phase (six months, extendable) assists with transitioning to private housing with continued support.

A total of 19 hours of interviews were conducted, covering three main stages: pre-migration and the Syrian conflict, in-transit experiences, and resettlement in Spain. Topics included participants' biographical details, integration challenges, discrimination, relationships with host and original communities, intimate relationships, education, and work opportunities. The in-transit section explored migration motivations, transit locations, refugee camp experiences, and challenges, while the Syria-focused section addressed life pre-war, education, employment, and family dynamics. Interviews concluded with reflections on overall experiences, personal impact, and future plans. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English.

To analyze the data collected from interviews, a *thematic analysis* approach was employed. This method is a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. Thematic analysis allows for a deep exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the shifts in gender roles during the acculturation process of Syrian refugee women in Spain. The study received ethical approval from the University of Oviedo's Ethics Committee. Participants provided written informed consent, and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing sensitive information.

RESULTS

Our results, presented in two sections, reveal the complex dynamics of acculturation and its impact on gender roles among Syrian refugee women. The first section examines how these women's backgrounds and life paths influence their acculturation strategies, resulting in notable changes in gender roles. The second section focuses on their transformative journey, highlighting four thematic dimensions: (1) language acquisition's influence on gender roles; (2) shifting gender expectations through Rola's case study; (3) negotiating gender roles and identity, and (4) reconstructing self-identity via Farah's case study. This analysis offers valuable insights into the intricate relationship between acculturation and gender dynamics.

Backgrounds and trajectories of Syrian refugee women: Influences on acculturation strategies

This study investigates the diverse backgrounds of Syrian refugee women in Spain, considering factors such as age, education, religion, and marital status. Each participant's distinct pre-migration experiences, motivations, journeys, and expectations, influenced by earlier Syrian arrivals or familiarity with refugee challenges (Berry 1997, 2006), shaped their resettlement paths. By examining these elements, we gain a nuanced understanding of migration complexities. This section introduces the refugee women participants and explores the moderating factors that influenced them before acculturation, shaping their strategies and contributing to shifts in gender roles.

Diala, 32, was the first participant to arrive in Spain, initially viewing her stay as temporary after being advised not to return to Syria due to the presence of chemical weapons in her region. With no clear expectations, she soon took on a leadership role within her family, quickly learning Spanish. Comparing her past and present, Diala notes,

> *"Girls in Syria are spoiled. I was not responsible for anything... I never bought bread by myself. Even my phone, my brother used to top it up for me [giggles]... When we came here, all the responsibilities [were put] on our shoulders, especially me since I was the one who speaks Spanish better than the others."*

She also described her struggle for independence when negotiating to live in her university's residential accommodation:

> *"In Syria, it was not acceptable for a girl to sleep outside of her family home… I negotiated with my family for almost two months until they agreed that I could move to the university residence [scoffs]."*

Now in Spain, Diala navigates a multicultural environment, adapting to diverse challenges (Haslam et al. 2008). Her experiences indicate she adopted a biculturalism strategy in her acculturation process.

Lama, 19, shared pre-migration experiences with Diala but pursued a different acculturation strategy. Arriving in Spain with her family – mother and two brothers – their move was driven by her brothers' pursuit of better work and educational opportunities. Having already fled to Egypt, where she had started studying law, Lama felt settled there. She expressed nostalgia for her Egyptian friends:

> *"I miss my friends who are in Egypt. When I left, some of them got married, and some are about to give birth [laughs]. Others are getting engaged. They are very dear to me; it makes me sad not to be with them at such moments."*

Lama's reluctance to view Spain as a permanent home was evident: "For sure, I am not planning to complete my life in Spain." This lack of motivation has hindered her Spanish language acquisition, leading to minimal contact and participation in the host society (Gordon 1964). Consequently, Lama's acculturation strategy, shaped by her attachment to her past life and family decisions, aligns with the concepts of cultural maintenance.

Um Motaz, 47, moved to Spain following her family's collective decision. Before arriving, they had spent four years in Turkey, where they settled, learned Turkish, and attended universities. The decision to relocate was driven by her children's desire for a better life in Spain. As Um Motaz recalled,

> *"When they offered us the chance to travel to Europe, you could see the excitement in everyone's eyes. As you know, just hearing the word 'Europe' is like a dream come true for these guys."*

Despite learning Spanish, the family struggled to find jobs, leading to disappointment. Um Motaz mainly interacted with the Syrian community and showed little interest in learning Spanish, relying on her sons and husband; her chronic back pain confined her to home. Her acculturation strategy, rooted in her strong ties to her Syrian background, is best described as cultural maintenance.

Sahar, 55, a Christian widow, experienced a shift in gender roles after her husband's death, becoming the sole provider for her family. Despite working for 30 years, the war forced her to stop. She recalls,

> *"We had some financial limitations, [so] I had to control how we spent the money. I was on my own, without any support from male relatives – neither from my husband's family nor my own family. I went through hard circumstances."*

During the war, Sahar faced religious tensions, stating, "We put on a headscarf, even for shopping, in case the mall was occupied by Muslims. ISIS spread their mentality, and our daily life changed." After fleeing to Germany, she was deported to Spain under the Dublin Regulation III. Despite adapting to new gender roles in Syria, she struggled with the language and age-related challenges in Spain, particularly with finding work: "For me, the reasons why I have not been able to find a job till now are the language barrier and age. It is not easy to find a job when you are 55 years old." Financially supported by her son in the U.S., Sahar's Christian identity facilitated a biculturalism strategy, promoting openness:

> *"As [...] Christian[s], we are very open-minded, even when we were in Syria. Our Christian community is more like [that of] European people. I have no limitations; I have no problem living with a guy, even if he is not my relative; he could be my friend."*

Talia, 47, a Muslim widow, arrived in Spain with her family. Unlike Sahar, Talia's education ended at high school due to her father's prohibition against further studies. She resisted an arranged marriage and started working in a sewing factory, eventually becoming a manager. She recalls, "Of course, it was difficult until my father agreed. So, I brought some people to convince him, and in the end, he was convinced." After nine years, she left her job upon marriage but resumed responsibility for her family after her husband's death two years before the war. Following years in Egypt, Talia resettled in Spain, where she acquired only basic Spanish, while her adult children mastered the language and took over family responsibilities. Despite past challenges to traditional gender roles, her current experience reflects cultural maintenance, marked by limited engagement with the host society and attachment to her roots. However, considering the evolving self-definition perspective (Turner et al. 1987), there is potential for Talia to shift toward biculturalism over time, as she balances her cultural heritage with her new experiences in Spain, allowing for a more integrated self-definition.

Razan, 34, fled with her husband and two daughters to Lebanon, where they found a refugee camp resembling pre-war Syria, reducing the cultural contrast (Al-Horani 2016). After six years, they entered a resettlement program in Spain, but the anticipated support was lacking, causing disappointment. Razan's dependence on her husband, as was evident in Syria and Lebanon, persisted, especially as she was pregnant upon arrival. Frustrated by unmet expectations, the family withdrew from Spanish society, adopting cultural maintenance as a coping strategy. Their desire to join relatives in Germany further reinforced their reluctance to engage in acculturation in Spain.

Similarly, Um Wael, 42, spent six years in a Jordanian refugee camp before resettling in Spain. Having completed ninth grade in Syria, she became a housewife while her husband was the breadwinner. They had three children during the war and three more in the camp. Initially told they would resettle in Sweden, a last-minute change redirected them to Spain. Um Wael recalled, "Spain [was] in bad condition, as we heard," and they had just 15 minutes to decide: "If you refuse, you will not be able to travel. You have to make a decision." With no other options, they accepted. Upon arrival, they faced poor treatment by the resettlement organization and were placed in an isolated rural area. Irregular language classes hindered their adaptation. Continuing her role as the primary caregiver, Um Wael and her husband struggled with language barriers, leading her to adopt a cultural maintenance strategy.

Fairouz, 22, fled to Lebanon with her family before marrying a Syrian man. Forced to leave Syria before completing her education, she resumed schooling in Lebanon, but it was not officially recognized. Continuing would have required repeating years, which was unfeasible due to her responsibilities as a mother to two young children, both born in Spain. Since arriving with her husband, Fairouz has attended few Spanish classes and stopped due to pregnancy and childcare duties: "I cannot go and leave the kids; I have no one, such as my family or anyone else, to leave my kids with." Her husband supports the family through his business, while Fairouz manages household responsibilities. Consequently, she follows a cultural maintenance strategy, though her young age suggests a potential shift toward biculturalism in the future.

Rola, 33, experienced an early shift in gender roles when her husband left Syria for work in Algeria, leaving her solely responsible for their children amid the war. Defying her husband's objections, she fled Syria with her children, later joining him in Algeria before continuing alone to Europe. Traveling independently fostered her self-reliance and skill development. While adhering to her religious beliefs, she adjusted them to fit her new environment, especially in her dress:

> *"I cannot wear the jilbab anymore.[3] I started wearing either dresses or long shirts [points to her knees] with trousers. I changed a bit, but not a total change. I changed in a reasonable way."*

Her independence and adaptability indicate a biculturalism strategy, blending her original and host cultures (LaFromboise et al. 1993). Rola's acculturation reflects a balance between identity continuity and identity gain (Ballentyne et al. 2021) as she navigated her cultural heritage alongside Spanish society.

Farah, 21, fled Syria before turning 18, seeking freedom from restrictions despite her Christian background. She explained, "I fled because I want this freedom: freedom to speak, to smoke, and to wear shorts." Facing escalating restrictions in a predominantly Muslim environment, worsened by extremist groups, Farah could not continue her education. Using a Schengen visa, she fled to Germany, later applying for asylum. However, under the Dublin Regulation III, she was deported to Spain. Upon arrival, she was involuntarily placed in a mental health center for five months, realizing this only after two weeks due to language barriers: "The documents provided were solely in Spanish, not Arabic. It took me two weeks to discern that I was in a mental health center." This led to cultural disengagement, marked by isolation: "For three months, I stayed at home, venturing out only for groceries before quickly returning." Over time, she formed friendships, had a Spanish partner, and adopted atheism, transitioning from cultural disengagement to cultural incorporation. Farah's journey aligns with Gordon's framework (1964), moving from minimal engagement to a higher degree of structural and cultural assimilation.

This section has introduced the participants and examined the pre-acculturation factors shaping their acculturation strategies. Although Spain was not the intended destination for many, their strategies reflect the dynamic nature of acculturation, influenced by demographic variables, in-transit experiences, and evolving perceptions of Spanish society. As participants adapt, their strategies may change. Recognizing the diversity among Syrian refugee women is crucial; while biculturalism and cultural incorporation promote identity gain and shifts in gender roles, cultural maintenance and cultural disengagement can restrict these transformations, limiting personal and societal change. The next section will further explore the complex dynamics of gender roles in their lived experiences.

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3 The term *jilbab* denotes a modest garment worn by Muslim women characterized by a loose-fitting, long outer layer over regular clothing. It reflects a commitment to modesty and Islamic dress codes, with design variations influenced by cultural and regional factors.

Transformations of gender roles and self-identity: Syrian refugee women's acculturation in Spain

The experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain reveal significant shifts in gender roles and identities. This analysis focuses on four key themes: the impact of language acquisition on gender roles, the potential temporary nature of these shifts, the negotiation of gender roles and identities, and how cultural incorporation aids in reconstructing self-identity among younger refugees. These themes highlight the resilience and adaptability of Syrian women during displacement and acculturation in Spain.

Theme 1: Language acquisition and gender role shifts

Upon arriving in Spain, refugees enter an 18- to 24-month reception program that includes language courses (AIDA 2022). Language proficiency is crucial for integration, but gender influences language acquisition among Syrian refugees. In Syria, women typically handle domestic tasks, while men manage external duties (Ashbourne et al. 2021). Consequently, men in Spain are more often expected to learn the language. For instance, Um Motaz's husband, fluent in multiple languages, already spoke Spanish upon arrival. She acknowledges, "The fact that my husband speaks Spanish helped us A LOT," indicating her reliance on his language skills. This dependence suggests she feels less pressure or motivation to learn Spanish herself, implying that his fluency reduced her need to acquire the language.

Fairouz represents another perspective. Arriving in Spain with her husband and giving birth to two children in Spain, she took on a traditional role, staying home while her husband, the breadwinner, quickly mastered Spanish through his business. This left her isolated, limiting opportunities to learn the language. When asked about her skills, Fairouz admitted, "I honestly do not know, just the basics. I know some words, and that is it. I got busy with my pregnancy, then the delivery, and later with my very young child." Managing two children alone restricted her outings, and she often waited for her husband's support to leave the house, reducing her urgency to learn Spanish. Describing her routine, she shared: "Most of my time is spent with my kids at home... It is difficult with two." This isolation and limited social interaction, combined with childcare duties, hindered her ability to practice and improve her Spanish, significantly affecting her language acquisition process.

In addition, age plays a crucial role in language acquisition among refugees. Data indicates that younger participants generally acquire language skills more

efficiently than older ones. Among the six younger participants, three – Diala, Farah, and Rola – quickly learned the language, resulting in a 50% success rate, while Fairouz, Lama, and Razan struggled. In contrast, all four older participants – Sahar, Talia, Um Wael, and Um Motaz – faced significant challenges in language acquisition, highlighting a consistent struggle among older refugees. This pattern suggests that younger refugees possess a greater potential for faster language acquisition, often assuming responsibilities typically associated with men, such as handling external tasks.

Diala's experience vividly illustrates this shift. Arriving in Spain in her 20s, she quickly demonstrated exceptional language-learning skills, becoming her family's primary communicator. Diala took on various responsibilities traditionally handled by her father in Syria, including processing documents, renewing residence permits, paying rent, and managing bills, largely due to his difficulties with Spanish. As both Diala and her brother sought employment to support the family, they effectively became the main breadwinners. This shift in Diala's gender roles arose not from intention but from the necessity of the family's survival in a new country.

The challenges faced by half of the younger participants suggest that factors beyond age – such as individual motivation, exposure, and the learning environment – significantly impact language acquisition (Masgoret–Ward 2006). Lama's case exemplifies this complexity. Despite her youth, she struggled with motivation and lacked a conducive learning environment, having moved to Spain to support her siblings' education and career opportunities at the expense of her own aspirations. Reflecting on her situation, Lama admitted, "Sometimes, I get angry about coming here [to Spain]." While her brothers became proficient in Spanish and assumed the family's external responsibilities, Lama's experience underscores the intersection of traditional gender roles, familial expectations, and personal challenges in the language-learning process. Thus, while younger age can be advantageous, her story illustrates that it does not guarantee success, particularly when personal and family dynamics are at play.

In some contexts, women with superior language skills may deliberately suppress or underestimate their abilities to maintain traditional roles from their home country, thus limiting interaction with the host culture. This suppression often arises from fears surrounding the responsibilities associated with language proficiency or the potential threat it poses to male guardians in the family (Berry 1997). By downplaying their skills, these women seek to avoid disrupting family dynamics and the dual burden of managing both male and female roles. Razan's experience exemplifies this phenomenon. After arriving in Spain with her husband and children, she struggled to attend

Spanish classes consistently, as her toddler was not allowed in class, and her husband had conflicting physiotherapy sessions. Despite these challenges, Razan's Spanish skills eventually surpassed her husband's. Although he encouraged her to assume more responsibilities, she prioritized caring for her children and domestic duties. During the autonomy phase of the reception system, her husband managed external tasks, preserving their traditional role division from Syria.

Older participants, despite efforts to learn the language, often struggled with progress, hindering full integration (ibid.). For instance, Sahar, a widow, made substantial attempts to learn Spanish, but her slow pace hampered advancement. Her age complicated retention, necessitating repeated courses: "If I stopped taking classes, I would forget what I have learned." This language barrier impeded her transition into new roles, forcing her back into dependency. Unlike in Syria, where she had been the breadwinner after her husband's death, Sahar now relied on her son and daughter in the United States. Reflecting on her experience, she noted,

> *"The only barrier is the language. I became even shyer because I could not share my thoughts. Unlike my personality in Syria, where I was a strong person. However, because of the language, I do not dare to meet new people."*

In the absence of men, women often assume traditional male roles, as illustrated by Rola's experience during the turmoil of war (Al-Horani 2016). Forced to adapt before arriving in Spain, she mastered Spanish to manage both domestic and external duties, opting to practice independently rather than rely on the NGO's translator. She noted, "Sometimes, I learn a lot of new words from my little kid."

In conclusion, the relationship between language acquisition and gender roles among Syrian refugees in Spain illustrates how traditional norms and individual circumstances shape the integration process. Men typically acquire language skills more rapidly due to their engagement in external tasks, while women face challenges linked to their domestic responsibilities, resulting in limited exposure and isolation. This dynamic perpetuates traditional gender roles within a new cultural context. Age complicates matters further; younger refugees generally learn languages more quickly, often leading to dependency among older individuals on their younger family members. When men are absent, women frequently assume both traditional and new roles, mastering the language and managing external tasks out of necessity.

Theme 2: Shifting gender expectations - Rola's case study

In his article *The emergent roles of Syrian women refugees in Jordan: Rethinking role theory and its frontiers*, Al-Horani (2016) discusses how the Syrian war significantly altered gender dynamics, describing these changes as "emergent," reflecting women's adaptation to extreme circumstances where traditional male roles became untenable. While some women experienced empowerment in the post-war context, many expressed a longing for their past lives, indicating that acceptance of new roles was influenced by the extraordinary conflict circumstances.

Rola's experience exemplifies this transformation. After her husband left to prepare a new home in Algeria, Rola became solely responsible for their children. As the situation in Syria worsened, she fled against her husband's advice, embarking on a challenging journey through Lebanon, Egypt, and ultimately to Algeria. Upon arrival, she was disappointed to find her husband absent at the airport, saying, "He was not waiting for me at the airport when I arrived... I was disappointed. I cried." Stranded and exhausted, Rola waited eight hours until her uncle's friends picked her up, and it took three more weeks for her husband to arrive.

Nearly a year later, as her husband struggled to find stable employment in Algeria, the family faced deteriorating conditions. Lacking official documentation and work rights, he resorted to illegal work. As their situation worsened, Rola decided to join her uncle in France. However, her husband unexpectedly chose to stay in Algeria, marking another disappointment. She managed to travel to Spain, then to France, but was sent back to Spain due to the Dublin Regulation III.

Once settled in Spain, overwhelmed by her responsibilities, Rola urged her husband to join them, expressing her exhaustion and fear: "I am so tired of being a single mother... I am afraid they will take the kids from me. You have to come." When he finally joined, he disappointed her further by insisting on returning to Algeria, claiming life there was better. Rola felt abandoned and alone, stating, "It felt like I was on my own... I already have the responsibility of the kids, the house, cooking, and teaching." Her husband's demands, including requests for assistance with tasks he could not manage due to his limited Spanish, compounded her sense of isolation.

Rola's acculturation aligns with the concept of biculturalism, as she adapted to Spanish culture while maintaining her Syrian identity. Her decision to stay in Spain, learn the language, and assume new responsibilities signifies an openness to cultural adaptation, coupled with a retention of her heritage. This journey revealed her capacity to fulfill traditionally male roles, contrasting

sharply with her earlier expectations of her husband. Her ability to navigate between two cultural contexts without abandoning either reflects a more flexible gender identity shaped by Spain's less rigid norms.

Ultimately, Rola's husband attempted to force a return to Algeria but failed, rejecting her divorce plea and remarrying, compelling Rola to initiate divorce proceedings. His abandonment, without legally ending their marriage, became another means of punishment for her.

While Al-Horani's article (2016) focuses on Syrian women in culturally similar neighboring countries, Rola's case illustrates that acculturation can be even more challenging in countries with vastly different cultures, like Spain. Though some women may find empowerment in emergent roles, many, like Rola, long for a return to traditional roles if given the option. This tension between newfound independence and a desire for familiarity underscores the complexities of adapting to shifting gender expectations in the aftermath of displacement.

Theme 3: Negotiating gender roles and identity

The resettlement experience requires refugees to undergo significant cultural and personal adjustments, especially in terms of gender roles and identities. Syrian women in Spain face the challenge of reconciling established norms with the new cultural environment, leading to a process of negotiation that involves adapting to societal expectations and redefining personal and familial identities. Their experiences reveal a complex interplay between traditional expectations and emerging freedoms, showcasing how resettlement prompts both resistance and adaptation in gender roles. In the early stages of resettlement, evolving gender roles among refugees arose out of necessity as they adapted to their new environment (Al-Horani 2016). Comparing Syrian and Spanish cultures led individuals to negotiate their gender identities, either reaffirming Syrian norms or blending both cultures (Benet-Martínez – Haritatos 2005). This stressful process prompted reflection on what was once considered 'normal,' even if it felt incorrect.

In negotiating her gender identity, Diala, as the family breadwinner, encountered familial resistance to women's autonomy. Undeterred by objections, she pursued a career and moved out to study, challenging traditional norms. Her choice of a non-Syrian partner was met with significant opposition, exemplified by remarks such as, "He is not Arab... He does not suit us." Nevertheless, Diala successfully convinced her family of her non-Western Muslim partner's suitability, attributing their eventual acceptance to her patience and the demonstration that non-Syrians can be good people.

Diala's perspective on relationships diverges from European norms; she sees a relationship as potentially devoid of a sexual component, contrasting with the European practice of cohabiting before marriage. She recounts,

> *"We have been together for two years. The first year at the university, we had the preparation classes together, so we were almost daily in each other's company... When they first saw him, I introduced him as a colleague."*

Her acculturation strategy – blending cultural heritage with newfound freedoms – involved negotiating her partner choice while maintaining family ties. Despite the stress these challenges caused, her financial support and commitment to a career bolstered her influence within the family. Her ambitious career path promises long-term benefits, fostering greater acceptance of her decisions.

Switching to Rola's experience, she initially perceived shifts in gender roles as inevitable, gaining insight through comparative reflection on women's rights issues in Syria. Embracing a biculturalism strategy, she modified her Muslim dress and supported her daughter's decision to wear the *hijab* [Islamic headscarf], empowering her agency: "My daughter put on the *hijab* this year, but I told her, 'You can remove it if you are not convinced about it.' Yet, she said, 'I want to wear it.'" When her husband sought to return to Algeria, fearing threats to traditional gender roles, Rola, as the registered guardian of their children in Spain, firmly rejected this move and retained their passports: "I do not want to take them out of here; I am comfortable here." Living without her husband, Rola challenged traditional gender norms, recognizing her capacity to make significant family decisions.

Negotiation of gender roles often extends to family members abroad, compelling women to seek permission or validation from male relatives in other countries. Farah's experience illustrates this dynamic; despite her brother applying for asylum in a different country, she felt pressured to inform him about her evolving identity in Spain. Although she lived with a Spanish partner, she kept their cohabitation a secret, viewing the mere acknowledgment of having a boyfriend as bold, given Syrian norms that dictate a marriage contract before sharing accommodation. Eventually, Farah disclosed this burden, recognizing that her brother, who had not witnessed her refugee journey or the challenges she faced, did not disapprove of her choices. As discussed in the fourth theme, Farah's self-identity reconstruction had progressed to a stage where she felt no obligation to negotiate her personal decisions with anyone else, asserting her right to define her own life.

Negotiation of identity extends beyond interactions with distant family members to encompass established gender roles and societal norms from Syria, which persistently influence Syrian women in Spain. Each woman internalizes a constructed notion of her expected roles as a Syrian, irrespective of her surroundings. Even when physically distanced from relatives or fellow Syrians, these ingrained norms create a sense of obligation, making it feel inappropriate to adopt roles outside those defined in Syria.

This invisible gaze compels adherence to community norms. Farah articulates this gaze: "Living in Syria is the worst thing that can happen for a woman … You cannot do anything; you cannot laugh in the streets because there is always someone gazing at you." For example, Sahar, a Christian widow, struggles to wear shorts in Spain despite her daughter's encouragement and her own desire. She finds it difficult to abandon the style she adopted in Syria, choosing instead to conform to what is deemed acceptable. This adherence may also intersect with her age; as a woman in her 50s, she perceives wearing shorts as an attempt to appear younger, while in Syria, women in her age typically dress conservatively. In contrast, Spain views wearing shorts as a personal choice, free from age-related stigma. Farah reflects on Syrian women's lives:

> *"In Syria, people look alike; same faces, and same reactions. If you decide to be different, they will attack you; you cannot be yourself. To summarize, life in Syria is like this; you study, you look for a job that you will spend 30 years on, and that is it. Once you reach the age of 60, you start waiting for your death. While here, at the age of 60, people start to live."*

The negotiation of gender roles and identities predominantly occurs among younger generations, as illustrated by Diala, Rola, and Farah. In contrast, Sahar and her peers face greater challenges in this negotiation, with many opting not to change, instead adhering to the same patterns they have practiced throughout their lives.

While negotiation can occur in the presence of family, as demonstrated by Diala, participants accompanied by their families – Um Wael, Um Motaz, Lama, Fairouz, Razan, and Talia – exhibited no signs of renegotiating their gender roles. Families often serve as observers, enforcing adherence to expected roles, which hinders these women from shifting away from the gender norms established in Syria. Although Lama, Fairouz, and Razan are of similar age to Diala, they continued to uphold the same gender roles, resulting in consistent behaviors in both Syria and Spain. Ultimately, family presence constrains opportunities for negotiation.

Religion significantly influences the negotiation of gender roles among Syrian refugees, especially among predominantly Muslim participants shaped by Islamic teachings (Maktabi 2010; Manea 2012; Al Jazairi 2015; Youngblood-Coleman 2021). Their acculturation strategies typically align with either cultural maintenance or biculturalism. Participants from highly religious families often adhere to cultural maintenance, limiting the negotiation of gender roles. In contrast, those from less rigid backgrounds may adopt biculturalism, allowing for moderate negotiation. In contrast, Christian participants, navigating their identities within Spain's secular framework, tend to embrace cultural incorporation, providing greater flexibility in negotiating gender roles. This is exemplified by Diala and Farah. While Diala operated within Islamic boundaries, Farah, a Christian refugee, faced no religious constraints in her identity negotiation. For instance, when discussing her university plans, Diala never considered cohabiting with her boyfriend, as this was impermissible within her faith. She remained committed to her religious practices, dismissing the idea of living with her partner.

Further comparison between Diala and Lama illustrates how religion shapes acculturation strategies. Diala adopted biculturalism, allowing some negotiation of gender roles, whereas Lama adhered to cultural maintenance without negotiation. When asked about pursuing a relationship, Lama stated, "I do not think so… I am trying to keep the same limits that my family set for me; I will not break them." Lama's more religious family reflects her limited capacity to negotiate gender roles compared to Diala.

In conclusion, the negotiation of gender roles and identities among Syrian refugee women in Spain is a multifaceted process shaped by factors such as age, family presence, and religious beliefs. Younger generations and those less bound by family expectations are more proactive in reshaping their gender roles, whereas older individuals and those closely accompanied by their families face greater obstacles in challenging traditional norms. Additionally, religion plays a significant role in this negotiation process. Understanding these dynamics reveals the complex interplay between resettlement, cultural adaptation, personal identity, and societal expectations.

Theme 4: Reconstructing self-identity – Farah's case study

Farah's case offers a compelling insight into the complexities of identity reconstruction and gender role shifts among young Syrian refugees arriving in Europe during their formative years (Berry 1997). At 18, she fled Syria ahead of her Christian family, driven by alienation from her culture and a desire for

self-determination and freedom from cultural norms that did not resonate with her – an urge that predated the war but intensified due to the conflict.

After an initial stay in Germany, marked by hardships in a refugee camp and months of homelessness, Farah was transferred to Spain under Dublin Regulation III. Her challenges escalated upon her arrival when she was involuntarily placed in a mental health center for five months, leading her to withdraw and adopt a cultural disengagement strategy. This isolation profoundly affected her mental health, causing a detachment from her Syrian identity and host society. Farah's journey toward healing involved addressing her mental health and separating her identity from the trauma of institutionalization.

Over time, she began to recover, gradually shifting towards cultural incorporation. By forming meaningful relationships, including one with her Spanish partner, she started to integrate into new social circles. Farah's transition from cultural disengagement to cultural incorporation underscores the multifaceted challenges of acculturation amid deeply ingrained cultural and familial expectations. Unlike many young refugees who maintain ties to their families or religious backgrounds, her atheistic stance within a Christian family adds a unique dimension to her narrative, placing her at a critical intersection of cultural and personal transformation.

Farah's cultural rebellion is evident in her interactions with her family, particularly her mother, who symbolized the traditions she sought to distance herself from. Uncommonly, she addressed her mother by her first name, breaking from the hierarchical norms typical in Syrian families. As a self-identified feminist, Farah actively challenged traditional gender roles, aiming to shift her older sister's mindset toward a more progressive outlook. Despite the geographical distance, she felt compelled to keep her brother informed about her life, reflecting the expectation that male siblings act as the family's protector.

Her redefinition of family structure began in Germany, during three months of isolation in a refugee camp, a period of deep reflection:

> *"I spent three months in the camp without talking to anyone at all. I was recording my sound and listening to it. Even people from outside the camp did not talk to me, including my family. No one knew what to say or how to cheer me up, as my situation was truly difficult."*

This isolation catalyzed her mental shift from collectivism to individualism, evident when she rejected the collectivist norm of mutual support among friends. Facing financial pressure from those she considered close, she abruptly left their shared home, choosing homelessness over dependency.

In Spain, her acculturation process was characterized by a growing sense of individuality, even with familial support available. Her assertive individuality, reflected in her decision to pursue partial employment, often created family tension. Nevertheless, her pursuit of authenticity and self-sufficiency took precedence. For example, she refused to hide her relationship with her Spanish partner. While her mother accepted it, Farah initially kept it secret from her brother, leading to feelings of inauthenticity.

Farah's journey illustrates the profound impact of cultural incorporation on young refugees. Arriving in Europe with a tenuous connection to Syrian culture, she forged a new self that actively challenges traditional norms. Her experience highlights how trauma, cultural detachment, and the quest for individuality can reshape gender roles and identity among refugees. Farah's commitment to authenticity and inner peace underscores the resilience and adaptability of those navigating the complexities of acculturation.

In conclusion, Farah's case provides critical insights into identity reconstruction among young Syrian refugees. Her early dissatisfaction with Syrian culture, combined with the challenges faced in Germany and Spain, positions her story as a vital lens for understanding shifts in gender roles and identity within a new cultural context. Her experience exemplifies the complexities of acculturation for those, like Farah, who arrive during formative life stages and must navigate the trauma of displacement alongside cultural expectations from their families and host societies.

DISCUSSION

Our study of Syrian refugee women in Spain reveals a diverse spectrum of backgrounds, encompassing age, education, religion, and marital status, each contributing to unique migration experiences, motivations, and expectations. These pre-acculturation factors profoundly shape their acculturation strategies and adaptation in Spain.

Some participants, initially unaware that Spain would be their final destination, expected a temporary stay and possible return to Syria, yet eventually embraced biculturalism. Others, believing Spain to be their permanent resettlement, had unmet expectations that led them to adopt cultural maintenance, treating Spain as a temporary *stop en route*[4] to other European countries. For some families, initial challenges in Spain prompted intentional cultural distancing, where one

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4 French expression means: *stop on the way* (ed.)

member's engagement with the host society through biculturalism or cultural incorporation sufficed for the entire family. Interestingly, some women adopted cultural maintenance under family pressure despite beginning new lives in transit countries. Those separated from family members often experienced shifts in gender roles, assuming responsibilities traditionally held by others, while unique circumstances like widowhood shaped acculturation strategies by blending past experiences with the Spanish cultural environment.

Participants' acculturation journeys often evolved over time, transitioning from cultural maintenance to biculturalism or even from cultural disengagement to cultural incorporation, illustrating the fluidity and dynamic nature of these processes. Acculturation strategies, influenced by demographic factors, transit experiences, and host society perceptions, led to varying degrees of gender role shifts. Strategies like biculturalism and cultural incorporation fostered new identities, while cultural maintenance or disengagement often preserved traditional roles.

The first theme emphasizes the transformative power of language acquisition for refugee women, enabling adaptability in gender roles but also leading to stress when it prompts shifts that male family members resist, occasionally resulting in violence (Ashbourne et al. 2021). This contradicts Berry's (1980b) *behavioral shift* perspective, which views cultural learning as stress-free. Our findings also challenge Ward and Kennedy's (1999) positive association between sociocultural and psychological adaptation, revealing that significant shifts in gender roles can lead to perceived negative adaptation, particularly when cultural distances between the host and origin cultures are vast. This underscores a need to reconsider the relationship between acculturation and psychological well-being, especially for minority groups.

The second theme, exemplified by Rola's experience, highlights how conflict and displacement imposed gender role changes. Rola's inability to revert to traditional roles upon resettling reflects a broader reality where shifts are more circumstantial than voluntary, emphasizing the pressures displacement imposes on women's identities. This constant negotiation between host culture adaptation and cultural heritage preservation often leads to isolation despite newfound independence and agency.

The third theme delves into the complex negotiation of gender roles, revealing that these changes often involve negotiations not only with family members, both in Spain and abroad but also internally as women challenge long-held gender norms adopted from Syria. This negotiation is influenced by factors such as age, family presence, and religious beliefs.

The fourth theme focuses on Farah, illustrating self-identity reconstruction among younger refugees. Her experience challenges traditional norms,

highlighting how younger refugees engage in deeper self-reflection and adaptation, navigating critical identity exploration stages.

Overall, pre-acculturation factors and subsequent acculturation strategies play a significant role in shaping the experiences of Syrian refugee women in Spain. Understanding these dynamics is vital for policymakers, social workers, and organizations who support refugees, providing insights into gender roles and identity evolution during resettlement. This study offers valuable guidance for efforts aimed at empowering Syrian refugees on their acculturation journey.

CONCLUSION

Our exploration of Syrian refugee women's experiences in Spain reveals a diverse array of backgrounds, life paths, and acculturation strategies influenced by age, marital status, education, and religion. Although the modest sample size limits broad generalization, the findings emphasize the critical role of pre-acculturation factors in shaping acculturation strategies. These factors determine whether refugees pursue proactive adaptation, maintain cultural distance, or navigate between cultures. Our study challenges Berry's (1980b) *behavioral shift* perspective, showing that cultural learning can involve significant stress. Language acquisition, while aiding sociocultural adaptation, often disrupts familial roles, provoking resistance from male family members and increasing stress and conflict.

We also advocate redefining traditional acculturation terms, suggesting biculturalism, cultural incorporation, cultural maintenance, and cultural disengagement over Berry's (1970, 1980a, 1990) integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. This reframing captures the coexistence of both original and host cultures, offering a nuanced view of acculturation. By focusing on Syrian refugee women, often overlooked in the literature, we shed light on their unique challenges, particularly gender role shifts and stress tied to language acquisition, enriching our understanding of the intersection between gender, culture, and adaptation.

Our findings highlight the need to resist homogenizing refugee groups, underscoring the importance of nuanced, culturally sensitive interventions. Comparative research with other refugee populations in Spain can enhance understanding and aid in developing inclusive reception programs. In summary, this study illuminates the intricate acculturation journeys of Syrian refugee women in Spain, challenging traditional frameworks and offering new insights into their experiences. Future research should continue exploring these themes to tailor support programs for effective integration.

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