

# POLICY BRIEF **03.16.23**

## **Marriage as a Durable Solution? How Syrian Refugee Women Use Marriage for Self-resettlement**

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It is estimated that Egypt has hosted about 500,000 Syrian refugees since 2011. However, most of these refugees are not included in official UNHCR statistics, which only count 119,665 registered Syrian refugees.<sup>1</sup> Limited awareness of registration opportunities, concerns over potential social stigmatization, and fear of being recorded in government databases are among the reasons why there is a discrepancy in the numbers of Syrians in Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Syrians who came to Egypt arrived in an economically troubled country and a politically polarized atmosphere, where they faced a lack of opportunities and a high cost of living.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomena of Syrian women marrying Egyptian men whom they barely knew soon after their arrival has drawn the attention of media and advocacy groups.<sup>4</sup> Such marriages have been facilitated and encouraged through different channels, including marriage brokers, social media, and religious groups.<sup>5</sup> This brief is based on fieldwork conducted in Egypt during the summer of 2017 investigating Syrian refugee women's strategies of self-resettlement, mainly through such marriages, a practice I call "marriage for refuge." In contrast to existing narratives that view this type of marriage as exploitative, I demonstrate how the concept of "marriage for refuge" offers a better lens through which to analyze the relationship between forced migration and marriage.

### **METHODOLOGY AND ANALYTIC APPROACH**

This brief presents results from 42 in-depth interviews conducted with Syrian refugee women and some of their Egyptian husbands.

Most of the women claimed that shortly after arriving in Egypt, regardless of their marital status — divorced, widowed, single mother, or never married — they were bombarded with marriage proposals from Egyptian men of different social classes. Informants described three types of marriage:

1. Quick, taking place within a few weeks or even a few days of the initial proposal.
2. Polygamous, where the man already has a wife and is seeking a second wife.
3. Customary or *Urfi* marriages, which are limited to the religious ceremony and hence are not officially registered.

When asked to elaborate on why they thought Egyptian men were seeking to marry Syrian refugee women in particular, almost all of the women made reference to the reputation of Syrian women in terms of physical beauty, femininity, self-care, and their high quality as housewives (compared to Egyptian women). However, some of the Egyptian husbands interviewed also complained about the financial burden of getting married to an Egyptian woman,



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**Displacement has dismantled persistent social structures surrounding both the meaning and the option of marriage.**

including ongoing and increasing requests for material support from her family that, they said, would likely follow. Some men said that with limited financial resources, they have a better chance of finding a “higher quality” Syrian partner — referring to intellectual qualities and social class — who might have fewer options to choose from compared to a potential Egyptian partner.

These results seem to reinforce the exploitative narrative presented by several advocacy groups and social media campaigns, which reduce Egyptian men's motivations for such marriages to the idea that “Syrian refugees are cheaper, prettier, better cooks and easier to marry.”<sup>6</sup> However, using a decolonizing lens,<sup>7</sup> this brief demonstrates how “marriage for refuge,” while not a justification of patriarchy and oppression, better analyzes the relationship between forced migration, marriage, and durable solutions to displacement.

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**MARRIAGE, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND SELF-RESETTLEMENT**

Many female respondents described marriage to an Egyptian man as a social, economic, and legal survival tool. They commonly referred to marriage as *sotra*, an Arabic word meaning “to cover,” often used to mean protection or sheltering. This should not be regarded as necessarily indicating a lack of affection and companionship in these marriages. Instead, marriage, in such cases, often serves a dual purpose of intimacy and protection. In this sense, marriage functions as a tool for economic support by providing financial security to the household. It also offers protection from other social pressures, including attempts to take advantage of these women due to their refugee status and their difficulties in managing cultural differences and day-to-day interactions. This includes a certain degree of shielding from verbal and sexual harassment, in particular, although this is still a serious issue affecting numerous women in Egypt.

When asked about the meaning of *sotra*, Marwa, a widow in her early thirties with two children and currently a second wife to an Egyptian man, said:

*“In my opinion, sotra means a man ... when you say: ‘that’s it!’ no one is going to harass me, no one is going to impose themselves on me. That’s it! I am with this man and so I can rest mentally.”*

Mona, a 45-year-old divorced woman from a well-off family in Syria, agreed with Marwa. Despite her financial stability, Mona still felt the importance of getting married upon arrival in Egypt and compared “a woman without a husband to a tree without leaves.”<sup>8</sup>

Some women also used marriage to a local person as a legal survival tool to secure legal residency status for themselves and their children, which is especially useful in an unpredictable political environment.

For some of the women, marriage was regarded as a way to regain their lost social status and social network. Nazira, a 45-year-old divorced woman who is currently happily married to an Egyptian man five years younger than her, dismissed the idea of marrying if she were back in Syria: “I would be among my family and my people ... I would have more than one man to take care of me.”

The respondents’ narratives reflect a strong awareness of social position, risks, and restrictions. Such restrictions are often a product of the respondents’ gender, their displacement, and their location in a foreign country where they lack social capital and cultural maneuverability.

That said, they were also able to identify options that suited their needs and made the best of their situations. For instance, Nouran was convinced that a woman’s “natural path is to get married eventually.” Her refugee status turned what she had already seen as her natural path — although now in a context of more limited and somewhat different options — into a solution, an opportunity, and even an advantage: Nouran’s gender and ethnicity gave her more choices than some other asylum-seekers in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> Based on Nouran’s rationale, other solutions like working as a hairdresser (her job before she married her first Syrian husband) would keep her away from her daughter during the work day, which could expose the daughter

to a relatively foreign culture and make her prone to exploitation and “humiliation.” Since Nouran’s child was her first priority, marriage was the safe or “decent,” if not the obvious, option in her situation.

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## MARRIAGE AND SELF-EMPOWERMENT

The interviewed women also demonstrated resourcefulness in leveraging many cultural and legal rules to make the best of their situations. For instance, some respondents explained that they preferred — in fact insisted — on keeping their marriages unregistered, i.e., an *Urfi* marriage, which is limited to a private religious ceremony. While many women sought to register their marriages to preserve their martial rights and legal status in the country, some preferred the precarious status created by the *Urfi* or customary marriage. They justified their choice in several ways. First, some women, like Nazira, said that marrying an Egyptian would entail the woman losing her legal refugee status with the UNHCR. Thus, by not disclosing their marriage, they could keep their yellow refugee card denoting their legal refugee status and therefore remain eligible for humanitarian financial assistance and food rations for themselves and their children. Second, by not registering their marriage with the Egyptian government, they hold onto a higher level of autonomy if they later decide that the marriage was a mistake, choose to leave the country, or want to go back to Syria. A customary marriage simplifies the separation process and makes it possible to legally claim single status outside Egypt if needed at a later date.

Similarly, some respondents emphasized their preference to be second wives, regardless of whether the marriage was registered or not. This was because many of them arrived in Egypt as single mothers after being divorced or widowed, and many did not want to be a “full-time” wife, which might distract them from their children. Being a second wife means that they only have a “part-time” husband who splits his time between two wives and two households (or more in very rare cases), allowing them more time for their children.

In humanitarian and economic development discussions, women’s empowerment is frequently translated as economic and financial independence or defined in terms of emancipation and subversion.<sup>10</sup> Growing evidence, however, suggests that economic empowerment or autonomy is not enough and, in some cases, not necessarily coupled with progressive outcomes for women.<sup>11</sup> For instance, there are mixed reports about how access to microfinance services impacts women’s empowerment, especially since involvement in such initiatives does not always translate into participation in household decision-making, control over assets, women’s physical mobility, and political and legal awareness.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, some Syrian refugee women in Jordan have reported needing to fulfill traditional gender roles while providing for their families, leading to increased responsibility, doubling their burden, and creating a less-than-ideal situation for some of the respondents who prefer not to work outside of their homes.<sup>13</sup> The examples in this case study demonstrate how women can leverage socially prescribed roles and practices for self-empowerment and to maximize self-interest.

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## MARRIAGE IMMOBILITY

Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that for some women “marriage for refuge” results in increased vulnerability — more so than before they fled the war zone. Despite marrying voluntarily, some respondents feel they have no real choice but to stay in the marriage and the country for reasons that, in their assessment, outweigh caring for their mental health.

Mohra, a 26-year-old Syrian mother of two who was lured to Egypt by her current Egyptian husband, is an example of this. Mohra’s husband offered to marry her and take her and her children out of war-burdened Syria, so she married him while she was still in Syria by mailing him a power of attorney form, which he used to legalize the marriage in Egypt. She traveled to him alone, hoping her children would follow soon, only to be shocked by the dire social

and economic situation in which he was living. Although her Syrian children followed her a little over a year after her arrival, after giving birth to a daughter in Egypt, she is now forced to choose between leaving her Egyptian child behind or suffering every day with her Syrian children in Egypt. Despite her complete dissatisfaction with her marriage, Mohra explained that saving her kids from the war zone was worth the initial risk of the marriage and even her current situation.

This means that some respondents are neither in a forced nor a voluntary marriage. They experience “marriage immobility,” a term I coin building on Lubkemann’s<sup>14</sup> notion of involuntary immobility. In this sense, marriage immobility refers to an “in-between” marriage status — neither forced nor voluntary. Mohra was convinced that she would eventually end up separating from her husband. However, when I followed up with her two years after our initial encounter, she was still “frustratingly” married to him. This reinforces the marriage immobility status that I argue describes her experience and has compounded her precarity as a young woman, a mother, and a refugee. Significantly, her experience cannot be accurately described by the voluntary/forced marriage dichotomy.

I submit that the notion of marriage immobility offers a useful analytical tool for understanding deeper layers of gendered refugee experiences, and it better characterizes the obstacles and causes of vulnerability. In other words, by decolonizing the binary relation between forced and voluntary marriage, and by capturing the state of in-betweenness, I seek to generate an analytical category that renders more visible the lives, experiences, and challenges facing some refugee women. This conceptualization, I argue, is more nuanced than current exploitation and humanitarian sexual and gender-based violence frameworks. We need a more holistic way to view and understand the multiple elements that inform marriage experiences for women in displacement.

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## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

By challenging the image of refugee women as mere victims, policymakers and practitioners could find innovative ways to engage them as experts in designing and leading local initiatives and solutions at the grassroots level. I recommend:

- Co-developing culturally relevant definitions and indicators to measure humanitarian notions such as empowerment and resettlement that go beyond economic and financial independence to include social and psychological integration.
- Centering local initiatives and solutions that are culturally informed about norms of social protection, particularly those focused on strengthening women’s social capital and enhancing family reunification.
- Training grassroots agencies to provide culturally relevant legal and mental health counseling as well as championing innovative solutions that engage refugee women in identifying challenges and designing solutions.
- Incorporating decolonizing frameworks<sup>15</sup> to change practices around humanitarian aid and justice, engaging people with lived experiences to understand and co-create solutions for the (overwhelmingly) non-Western refugee experience. This includes “othered” social experiences and arrangements such as: What defines a real marriage? What role can the extended family play in creating a more robust resettlement experience? How can we acknowledge the spectrum between voluntary and non-voluntary marriage to better understand and address gendered displacement?

## CONCLUSION

“Marriage for refuge” demonstrates the varied effects displacement has on the gendered refugee experience. The uprootedness caused by displacement imposes complex limits, often dictated by patriarchal patterns, on displaced women’s survival tools and options, that lead to marriage being considered as an obvious or “decent” option. However, that displacement has also offered some refugee women a social advantage available only to their specific gendered and ethnicized group — not to other social groups within the refugee community, e.g., male refugees. More importantly, displacement has dismantled persistent social structures surrounding both the meaning and the option of marriage (and remarriage) in many cases. Marriage can now be framed as a tool for self-resettlement, self-protection, and self-empowerment.

Durable solutions for refugees are often shaped by a victim-savior paradigm that reinforces a power imbalance between refugees and the global humanitarian system.<sup>16</sup> In this brief, I sought to center gendered, self-initiated, and innovative resettlement options that pose critical questions to refugee studies and gender studies by shifting the discourse toward “self-authorized modes of protection”<sup>17</sup> and “self-rescue” resettlement options.<sup>18</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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4. Ashraf Bayoumi, “Marriage to Syrian Refugee Women ... between charity and sex trafficking,” Masrawy, September 28, 2013, [https://www.masrawy.com/news/news\\_reports/details/2013/9/28/64964/](https://www.masrawy.com/news/news_reports/details/2013/9/28/64964/).

5. Khalid Hassan, “Why some Syrian refugees see marriage as the only option?,” *Al-Monitor*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/egypt-syria-refugees-women-marriage-aid.html#ixzz4ltgbszpg>.

6. Nancy A. Youssef and Amina Ismail, “Refugee Brides in Demand,” *The Star*, July 4, 2013, <https://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/women/2013/07/04/refugee-brides-in-demand>.

7. I understand “decolonizing” as theoretical and methodological strategies that strive to offer alternative world views to the hegemonic Western interpretations of history and social order. In essence, decolonizing posits that notions such as emancipation, empowerment, and victimhood are social constructs, allowing more room and imagination to understand diverse refugee experiences. Decolonization, thus, helps question the “either/or” binaries constructed among notions such as privilege/disadvantage, oppression/emancipation, empowerment/exploitation, voluntary/involuntary, and agency/victimhood.

8. More details about Sutra marriage can be found at Dina Taha, “‘Seeking a Widow with Orphaned Children’: Understanding Sutra Marriage Amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Egypt,” in *Migration and Islamic Ethics* Volume 2 (Brill, 2019) 67–91.

9. This includes other sub-Saharan refugees such as Sudanese, Eritreans, and Somalis who due to their ethnic background might not have the same appeal to Egyptians. For detailed discussion about race and shadeism or discrimination against darker skin tones and how it often derives from the privilege given to whiteness, anti-blackness, and desire for whiteness see Amrit Kaur Dhillon, “Lighten up: Exploring Skin Lightening Practices among Canadian South Asian Woman.” (November 2016) Masters thesis, York University, <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/33448>.



10. See for instance, Marloes A. Huis, Nina Hansen, Sabine Otten, and Robert Lensink, "A Three-Dimensional model of Women's empowerment: Implications in the field of microfinance and Future Directions," *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017): 1678.

11. Ibid.

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13. Karen Culcasi, "'We are women and men now': Intimate spaces and coping labour for Syrian women refugees in Jordan," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 44, no. 3 (2019): 463-478.

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18. Christopher Kyriakides, Lubna Bajjali, Arthur McLuhan and Karen Anderson, "Beyond Refuge: Contested Orientalism and Persons of Self-rescue," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 50, no. 2 (2018): 59-78.

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