

When Facts Falter: Practicing Reflexive Ethnography When Co-Constructing the Identity of Syrian Refugee Women

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that refugee women are more vulnerable to culture shock than men due to the ongoing process of negotiating one's social and cultural identity; however, few studies have been conducted to further explore this phenomenon. In this study, I provide new insight into the experiences of Syrian refugee women resettling in the United States by highlighting the moments of hesitation involved in their identity negotiation. Using a reflexive ethnographic approach, I draw on my participant observations and informal interviews to ask, "What does it mean to be both a mother and a provider?" Ultimately, I argue that the new roles my interlocutors take up do not reflect what American women have, what their families value, or even what their friends hope for them. Instead, the Syrian women construct their new identities on their own terms given their unique concerns, hopes, and perspectives, and by relying on a reflexive methodological approach, I can begin to describe the changing women's roles within the St. Louis Syrian refugee community.

Keywords: refugee women, reflexivity, ethnography, identity, culture shock, refugee resettlement

women sit with straight backs and glistening faces. Around 3:30 P.M., it's time to pack. It is a good day, so the women make around \$150 each. Amira wants to take her kids shopping for school supplies. Badia has hospital bills to pay. Yara wants to help her husband put food on the table, and Fatima sends all her money back to Jordan where her parents and siblings live in a refugee camp. For the first time, these women are making their own money and spending it as they see fit.

At the Farmers' Market

I am driving to the St. Louis farmers' market, and my friend Amira, a Syrian refugee, leans over the center console to tell me more about her life in Damascus. At fifteen-years-old, Amira married the love of her life, Hassan, who was twenty at the time. They met in his family's butcher shop, and it was love at first sight. She explains that some couples still have an arranged marriage, but their meeting was *kismet*. Within the first year of their marriage, Amira gave birth to a baby girl, Jamal, followed by another daughter, Rima. Amira's mother taught her how to both cook and run a household with love and efficiency. Now, she loved caring for her family, and Hassan praised her constantly. Amira never knew any woman who worked outside the home.

It is 7:35 A.M. when we get to the market—still plenty of time to set up the craft booth. Fatima, Yara, and Badia are already here and have claimed our spot between two large oak trees. We will need plenty of shade to block the 90-degree, July heat that at times seems inescapable. We then begin unloading the crafts from the various duffle bags. Macramé hangers, succulents, clunky jewelry, and crochet yoga bags emerge (see Figure 1). These women know their target customer: twenty-something hipsters who do not think twice about dropping \$50 on an impulse buy. Throughout the day, I sit with the women while they sell. At 10:30 A.M., Badia passes around styrofoam cups filled with bitter Arabic coffee. At 12:30 P.M., Yara's husband delivers *shawarma* and *falafel* to everyone while their six kids wait in the van. By 2:15 P.M., the women begin sweating profusely under their hijabs and layered clothing. I sit quietly in jeans and a button-down shirt; I am thankful that I can pull my hair into a tight bun. There is no mention of the heat; instead, the



Figure 1. The refugee women wait for customers at the St. Louis farmers' market. Photo by author.

Introduction

In this study, I reflect on my recent fieldwork with Syrian refugee women and their experience negotiating new cultural identities here in the United States. In particular, I ask, "What does it mean to be both a mother and a provider?" and listen for the internal conflict, for the hesitation and disruptions that occur when some Arab women begin to seek employment opportunities while others wrestle with the costs of role-switching. Doing so entails analyzing identity crisis as my ethnographic subject, and in analyzing this subject, the fieldwork becomes less about collecting facts and more about recognizing the moments when facts falter, and hesitation occurs. In these moments, I am arrested by the uncertainty that the Syrian woman feels, and in sharing this uncertainty, I can begin to understand rather than simply know her experiences. However, such understanding can dissolve the professional distance between the

ethnographer and her interlocutors and initiate the practice of reflexive ethnography. Therefore, using a reflexive ethnographic approach, I invite my participants to share in their moments of hesitation as they construct new cultural identities, and this allows me to describe the changing roles of women within the St. Louis Syrian refugee community.

In what follows, I explore the internal conflict that many Syrian refugee women experience surrounding the negotiation of their new identities. I do so by first constructing a methodology rooted in reflexivity to promote more nuanced and ethical research. I then present an overview of the current literature on culture shock as it relates to the negotiation of social and cultural identities with an emphasis on the experiences of refugee women. Using a reflexive approach, I analyze my ethnographic observations and informal interviews with the Syrian women—highlighting the hesitations and deliberations involved in deciding which roles and identities they ultimately adopt. I conclude by arguing that these new roles my interlocutors adopt do not reflect what American women have, what their families value, or even what their friends hope for them. Instead, the Syrian women construct their new identities on their own terms given their unique concerns, hopes, and perspectives.

Practicing Reflexive Ethnography

As I approach this study, I recognize how different my background is compared to my participants—linguistically, culturally, and religiously to name a few. How then am I able to conduct research and derive meaning from a culture I am not a part of? It is in response to this important question that I rely on a methodology and analysis rooted in reflexivity. By practicing reflexive ethnography, I highlight the ways in which I, as an individual with a particular social identity and background, affect the research process, and I address the biases, assumptions, beliefs, and values that I carry into the study. Reflexivity therefore is “essential in augmenting the integrity, credibility, and trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry” (Valandra 2012, 204), and it is “central to debates on subjectivity, objectivity, and ultimately, the scientific foundation of social science

knowledge and research” (Hsuing, 2008, 211). Additionally, reflexivity is not a practice which occurs in isolation; it is a social, relational process between the researchers and his or her interlocutors. Collaborative reflexivity encourages researchers to practice self-examination while offering an opportunity for participants to share their unique perspectives and conflicting positions within particular social contexts. In what follows, I argue that it is through these collaborative moments that I can begin to describe the hesitation my interlocutors felt surrounding the roles of women.

But what does reflexivity look like in practice? In an interview with Pavlos Kavouras, Clifford Geertz insists that collective representations of selfhood are key to developing interpretations (Panourgiá 2008). By identifying oneself in a text and recognizing one’s situated position in relation to other texts, ethnographers and participants can begin to negotiate what is proper and right behavior (Panourgiá 2008, 23). For example, when I enter a Ramadan meal, it is important for me to be aware of any underlying influence that I may bring to the situation, my own expectations for the evening, and my perceptions of Islamic traditions in relation to the overarching text that is the meal. If I do not, then I may mistakenly misunderstand what is proper and right behavior. Geertz further argues that we can never analyze a situation outside our own frame of reference. As David Hockney once said, “our big mistake was to describe the world as though we were not in it” (qtd. in Yang 2015, 449). When researchers write about talking and living with people, going to the market, and walking around, it is pointless to try to make readers believe that all the insights came from an objective information-producing machine.

Second, reflexivity emphasizes ethical research. In *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher: Using Ourselves in Research*, Kim Etherington (2004) defines reflexivity as an “ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings” (Etherington 2004, 19). Reflexivity calls for critical reflection on the self as a research instrument and “actively locating

oneself within the research process” (Yang 2015, 449). Ultimately, this reflection requires researchers to continually examine their methods to ensure high quality research that also respects the participants. Reflexivity as a concept has been further defined by Lai Fong Chiu (2006) in the article “Critical Reflection: More than Nuts and Bolts.” Chiu categorizes three types of reflexivity: self-reflexivity, relational reflexivity, and collective reflexivity. Self-reflexivity calls for researchers to “become aware of their hidden assumption in the process of knowledge making.” Relational-reflexivity prompts researchers to “attend to power differentials and to collaborate with participants,” and collective reflexivity promotes “critical awareness amongst participants” (Chiu 2006). Each of these aspects promote ethical research.

Methodology

This project was conducted through my summer 2018 internship with International Literacy and Development (ILAD), an organization dedicated to helping marginalized people through language instruction and economic development. My objective for the internship was two-fold. First, I was to research possible job-creation opportunities specifically tailored to Syrian refugee women. Most immigrants who resettle in St. Louis come from cultures similar to Western culture where women are expected to pursue employment. Therefore, these refugee families are at a disadvantage living in the United States where a family of eight must oftentimes survive on a single income. Second, I was to teach informal English lessons to Syrian women in their homes. These lessons were mostly one-on-one, but there were a few combined with children and husbands. I taught English regularly to nine women over the course of ten weeks, and I worked with twelve Syrian women in a sewing class. By meeting with a wide range of women in both a home and work setting, I was able to better understand what types of jobs would best fit the Syrian woman’s lifestyle. However, I quickly learned through my fieldwork that the various obstacles for Syrian women getting jobs were more cultural than logistical, and these barriers were not necessarily outside forces keeping them at home. It was their own

convictions about the role women should play as their families integrate into American life. I did meet some women who were extremely eager to explore possible career options. Others were apprehensive to say the least; however, most were caught somewhere in between the two—tangled in an identity crisis. For example, the women who sold macramé and jewelry at the farmers’ market all seemed interested in selling online or in local fair-trade stores until it came time to follow through. They enjoyed the social aspect of making and selling crafts with their friends; however, many did not want to make more money than their husbands. These moments of hesitation and internal conflict are what prompted me to conduct more interviews on the subject and utilize reflexive ethnography that validates the co-construction of identity.

Because most of my interactions with the women took place in the home, the nature of my project quickly became informal and intimate. After just a few lessons, most of the women asked me to help sort their mail. I became an expert at answering questions on medical forms, filling out food stamp applications, and throwing away advertisements. Consequently, we established a level of trust and even became close friends. In order to maintain this friendship and minimize any potential power dynamics, I chose not to record our conversations; instead, I took detailed notes. Looking back at these notes, I have pulled the stories that most readily highlight the negotiation of social and cultural identities.

Situating the Ethnographer

In an interview with fellow anthropologist, Neni Panourgiá (2008), Clifford Geertz argued that when writing about another culture, “You don’t get to sign just your name anymore, you have to sign your identity.” We, the ethnographers, are all “situated observers,” as Geertz explains, “We don’t stand on the moon, we stand somewhere.” Sometimes this “somewhere” is our own culture, sometimes not, but “wherever we are, we are situated” (Panourgiá 2008, 26). Any attempt to cast away our personal identity becomes problematic and affects how we perceive and write about other cultures. For

instance, when working with Syrian women, I am mindful of where we are each situated. I sit educated, single, with my hair exposed, and wear a cross on my finger. Meanwhile, Amira, Badia, Yara, Fatima, Radeyah, Hafsa, and Nadira sit covered with hijabs, and they have spent their whole adult lives fulfilling the roles of mother and wife. So, as we talk about different women's roles, the Syrian women and I know that, in a sense, we are talking about the pros and cons of the other's perception of womanhood.

Therefore, before I begin to analyze the shifting identities of Syrian women, it is important to construct my own identity as an American woman by exploring all that is being negotiated within our dialogues and listening for the inevitable hesitation that happens when we, Syrian women and I, run into conflict. In the following passages, I present four anecdotes where we examine my relationship status around Hafsa's dinner table, my family background at Fatima's kitchen table, my education at Amira's stove top, and my religion on Radeyah's couch. I will follow each of these scenes with a brief analysis as they pertain to the co-construction of my identity compared to the Syrian woman's as she begins to test the boundaries of possible roles for herself.

We are seated around Hafsa's living room—the only room where her family of nine and I can sit together comfortably for a four-course meal. She speaks almost no English, but her son, Majed, translates for us. After the coffee and *ma'moul abiad*, the polite small talk turns into an unexpected interview. It begins with "Where are you living?" and "What are you studying?" However, the questions inevitably become more personal: "Do you have a husband? A boyfriend? No? You are how old? Umm... what about a wife?" Knowing that I am the only single American woman she knows, I laugh, shake my head, and try to assure her that I can take care of myself without a significant other. Even so, Hafsa sends me home that night with a plate of food and a blessing to be safe on the road as if I am going on a road trip, not a fifteen-minute drive. I had never thought of myself as an extremely independent person before, but as I climb in my car that night and drive across St. Louis to an

empty house, I reflect on Hafsa's concern. She was not the only Syrian refugee woman I met to comment on my living situation and being so far from family. Through these interactions, I came to understand how she, and others, might perceive me: independent, yet isolated, and somewhat reckless for choosing this lifestyle.

Around midnight, Fatima passes me the hookah pipe and asks about my family. I tell her about my dad, my sister, and my two brothers. I explain that my mom died last year. "Do you know what cancer is?" From around the corner, I heard her daughter, Waheeda, exclaim, "I have cancer! Your mom died? Where was it?" I can feel my face turning red as I press my hands to my chest and stomach to indicate its location. Waheeda gave a huge sigh, "Oh good, mine's just in my eye!" I pass the pipe back to Fatima as we compare treatment plans. Fatima tells me that when her family lived in a refugee camp in Jordan, she would take her daughter to the doctor, and rats would be crawling on the floors. She never thought that she would be able to bring her daughter to the United States for treatment. When we met again the following week, Fatima and Waheeda began speaking openly about their experience navigating the U.S. healthcare system and going to the hospital while not knowing English. Fatima knows that I will never fully understand these experiences, but she still confides in me and comes to see me as a friend.

"Two scoops then stir for maybe five minutes," Amira instructs as I try to make Arabic coffee. The little copper pot bubbles with dark espresso over the stovetop, and the smell alone is strong enough to give me a caffeine buzz (see fig. 2). "What do you study at school?" As I stir, I explain that I want to teach English as a second language. I might try to work with kids, but I really like working with adults. She nods along while helping her daughters plate our dessert, a type of sweet bread. I ask her if she knows what her daughters will do when they grow up. Amira admits that she has no idea. However, she insists that her daughters are going to college explaining, "This is my dream." Before selling macramé at the farmers' market and occasionally catering for her American friends, Amira never worked outside the home before, and while wrestling with her own decision of

whether or not to start her own catering business, she also thinks about her daughters working. Whenever we met, Amira always asks about my school, my work, and where I would move once I graduate. By answering her questions, I give her a glimpse into what that life might look like as a young, working woman.



Figure 2. Visits with Amira always included coffee. Photo by author.

I pass my iPhone to Radeyah so that she can scroll through pictures of my family. “You and your mom look like sisters!” She then stumbles across my study abroad pictures from spring 2017. “What countries have you traveled to?” I start listing: England, France, Haiti, Chile, Argentina, Peru, and Canada. She recognizes all of them but Haiti. “Why did you go there?” I explain that I went there with my church to help the community there and deliver supplies to the schools. Radeyah listened intently, but I could tell she was a little confused. “Did you only help the Christians?” I answered, “No, we helped everyone—Christian and non-Christian.” I explain that I would love for all the people there to become Christians, but even if they do

not, we are still going to help them. She nods taking this in and then explains that there are many organizations in St. Louis who help refugees until they realize that they will not convert to Christianity. She tears up as she tells me about one woman who stopped visiting her because she did not want to talk about religion. I respond by insisting, “Radeyah, you’re not a Christian, but I’m still going to be here for you if you need help. Would I love for you to be a Christian? Yes, probably as much as you want me to be a Muslim. But, even if that doesn’t happen, you’re still my friend.” Over the summer, Radeyah would come to me with her questions about Christianity: “Why do we say there is one God but also say that Jesus is God? What does the bible say about Mohamad? How do Christians pray compared to Muslims?” To her, I am a Christian who will not try to convert her, and I will continue to be her friend.

From Culture Shock to the Negotiation of Identities Among Refugee Women

Over the past decade, several studies have been conducted to identify the determinants of culture shock among Middle Eastern and African refugees and asylum seekers resettling in Western countries (Milner and Khawaja 2010; Slonim-Nevo and Regev 2015; Yako and Biswas 2014). Researchers hoped that identifying these factors would enable tailored programs to promote the well-being of refugees and inform mental health professionals working with these specific populations (Slonim-Nevo and Regev 2015; Milner and Khawaja 2010). The results from these studies showed that culture shock was not significantly associated with socio-demographic characteristics including age, education, marital status, language proficiency, rural/urban origin, or months of residency in the receiving country (Slonim-Nevo and Regev 2015, 127). In fact, the clearest determinant of culture shock was *gender* (Slonim-Nevo and Regev 2015, 128). According to Vered Slonim-Nevo and Shirley Regev, their 2015 study was the first to examine the determinants of culture shock revealing the discrepancy between men and women. Women showed significantly higher culture shock scores than men, and these scores seemed to increase with the time

spent in the receiving country rather than the expected decrease (Slonim-Nevo and Regev 2015, 128). Following this study, Slonim-Nevo and Regev (2015, 133) speculated that this variation was the result of a move from a patriarchal society to a more egalitarian society where women may assume new roles and negotiate new social and cultural identities for themselves. However, no studies have been conducted to address these different experiences between men and women specifically.

Andrea DeCapua and Ann C. Wintergerst (2016) in their book, *Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom* outline five major themes of culture shock with one being the negotiation of cultural identity. Cultural identity is generally divided into three broad categories: human (the features that make us human), personal (the characteristics that individuals believe they possess that differentiate them from others), and social (identity that derives from societal roles) (DeCapua and Wintergerst 2016, 132). Human and personal identities tend to remain stable throughout life; however, our social identities are subject to change, especially when one is immersed in a new culture. DeCapua and Wintergerst explain that these new roles and expectations create stress and anxiety, which, in turn, threaten one's self-identity. This literature suggests that refugee and immigrant women in particular are vulnerable to culture shock due to the process of negotiating one's cultural identity. By highlighting these moments of hesitation and negotiation in this study, I provide new insight into the experiences of Syrian refugee women resettling in the United States.

Refugee Resettlement Structure and Pressure

As I discuss how Syrian refugee women wrestle with the construction of their new identities here in the United States, it is important to note the structural and cultural pressures placed on them. Concerning structural pressures, the United States refugee resettlement system is founded on the assumption that successful refugee integration is synonymous with financial self-sufficiency (Darrow 2018a, 36; Office of Refugee Resettlement [ORR] 2017).

This emphasis on employment is not a secret. In fact, agency employees are often tasked with the job of emphasizing the importance of employment to clients and will even withhold services from those who do not pursue every opportunity to obtain it (Darrow 2018a, 54). In her recent article, Jessica Darrow (2018a, 41) draws on her own ethnographic data to explain that because successful integration is synonymous with financial independence, resettlement agencies must submit annual reports to their state and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) indicating how many clients they got to work each month and how quickly. Not meeting these job-placement quotas may result in the Early Employment Services (EES) contract not being renewed, jeopardizing the agency's ability to continue resettling clients (Darrow 2018a, 41). This policy creates an incentive for agencies to get as many clients to work as quickly as possible, and this is especially true for refugee women whose employment may result in their families becoming financially independent (Darrow 2018a, 41).

On the other hand, Syrian refugee women may experience social pressures from their original culture to avoid employment. None of the women I spoke with had ever worked outside the home prior to resettling in the United States, and when I asked whether they knew other women who worked, few could recall a friend or a relative in Syria who pursued a career or was employed. In 2005, before the war reduced economic activity, female participation in the labor force was at 16.3 percent while males were at 76.1 % respectively (Hudock 2016, 28-29). This is surprising when one considers that Syrian women typically obtained similar levels of higher education (Hudock 2016, 28-29). Instead, most women I met had married when they were fifteen or sixteen years old and immediately started families. When speaking with my interlocutors, it was apparent that these social norms were at the forefront of their minds when considering whether to pursue employment opportunities. After resettling in the United States, it seemed that some women embraced the new opportunities to further their education and seek employment. Meanwhile, others in trying to preserve one's original cultural identity and

reclaim a state of normalcy, reverted to more traditional roles. Still, most women were a kaleidoscopic mixture of the two that was more complicated than a simple dichotomy. The moments when each woman negotiates which roles or identities to take up is my ethnographic subject.

Radeyah: God of the Home

Radeyah calls to ask whether I would like mint in my tea. The sweet aroma of spice and sugar follows her back into the living room as she carries a tray of miniature teacups, mixed nuts, and *baklava*. Though she considers me her best American friend, I am still treated with the formality of an honored guest in her home. My knees are folded up to my chest as I sink into her couch, but I drink from her family's finest ceramic glassware. While her four young children play with toy cars and watch Arabic cartoons on YouTube around the coffee table, I ask Radeyah, "What do you think of women's roles in the United States?" Radeyah quickly let me know that she is uncomfortable most of the time with how women act here. She agrees that women should have freedom and that they should be able to get an education. More than anything, she wants her daughter to be able to go to college. But she is sad when she sees so many older women (women in their 30s and 40s) with no one to take care of them. Because of the freedom that women have, she worries that they are not in turn respected. Here, women flaunt themselves and sleep around. At least in her country, men respected women enough to approach the family before thinking about a possible relationship. Later in the summer, when it is announced that women are now able to drive in Saudi Arabia, Radeyah tells me that freedom for women in America is good, but the traditional Saudi Arabian culture is not ready for that yet. She predicts that it will bring more harm than good. I ask Radeyah if she ever considered applying for a job when she came to St. Louis, and surprisingly, she tells me that she used to work at a Middle Eastern restaurant as a hostess. But, when she started to make more money than her husband, she quit. Radeyah insists that her husband does not care whether she makes more money than him or if she works. She just could not shake her convictions about her role in the home. Radeyah ends that

particular conversation with this: "In my country, we say that the man is the God of the home. Who am I to take that role?"

Amira's Decision

As I arrive at my interlocutors' booth at the farmers' market, I say a quick hello to Amira before taking my place behind the table of jewelry where Fatima and Yara are already drinking their morning tea. All the women in attendance had contributed to the booth—each arranging their own jewelry and macramé around the pop-up tent. But Amira's work clearly stood out and always sold first. She was a natural at weaving macramé, and customers would always stop and linger by her work. Amira also had a thriving business on Facebook where customers would message her pictures of yoga bags, blankets, or wall décor they saw on Pinterest. She would work throughout the week to have it ready for pick up the following Saturday (Figure 3). Amira was also an outstanding cook, and when she was not preparing for the farmers' market, she was catering dinner parties for her American friends. Some of the other women were jealous of her success, but most did not mind and were just glad to be spending every Saturday with friends.

I ask Amira if she ever thought about selling her work in a store. There were several local, fair-trade gift shops in the area and her work would fit both their style and clientele. At first, she tells me that she is interested and asks if I would go with her to show the store managers her work. However, when I bring it up again a few weeks later, she changed her mind. Instead of moving to a store, she expressed that she wanted to keep her work as a hobby. When I asked her how she came to this decision, she grew quiet and then explained that if she started a formal business and made more money, her family would no longer be eligible for food stamps. To her, this was a terrifying prospect, because she did not think that she could sell enough to make up the money that the food stamps were currently saving her. Why would she choose to work twice as hard to fill a storefront if she would ultimately end up with less money? Amira also wondered how well her work would sell in a store compared to the market, and ultimately, these barriers proved to



Figure 3. Amira's macramé hanging in her house before the farmers' market. Photo by author.

be too much of a risk. For now, she would continue cooking and selling her crafts at the market.

Radeyah: The Syrian Dream

During one of our visits, Radeyah asks me about the advantages and disadvantages of public and charter schools in St. Louis. Her Arab friends keep telling her that she should move out to the county as soon as she can because the public schools are better, but she likes the charter school her children are currently enrolled in. The teachers are friendly, and the school is in their neighborhood, so she and her husband walk the children to school every day. However, it seems like everyone idealizes life outside the city. Radeyah has heard that it is safer there, more private, and a better place to raise her children. I explain to Radeyah that her friends are probably relaying the advice that they received from other Americans. I then give her my opinion that county schools are, indeed, good schools, but an even stronger draw to the suburbs is the idea of achieving the “American

Dream.” I explain that, here, many American families have the goal of someday owning their own house in a quiet neighborhood where their kids are safe. Radeyah nods and says that there is such a thing as a Syrian Dream too. Radeyah explains that because many Syrians view authority figures as corrupt, the dream is to someday become your own boss. Business owners may still have to bribe the local government in order to stay open, but at least they maintain some control over their livelihood.

Once Radeyah explained this to me, I began to notice this pattern of entrepreneurship among her Syrian friends and extended family. Before setting foot on U.S. soil, they may have already started their own businesses, or they have an idea for one. In fact, St. Louis has capitalized on this refugee entrepreneurial mindset. Over the last decade, the economy of the St. Louis Metropolitan Area alone has experienced significant economic strain: wages have increased 14% less than other metro areas, expansion is 30% slower than other cities, and the region lost nearly 45,000 jobs (3.3% of its workforce) (Strauss 2012, 10). All these issues are attributed to outward migration and the aging baby boomers. However, a report by Jack Strauss, the Simon Chair of Economics at Saint Louis University, shows that “there is one specific way to simultaneously redress the region’s population stagnation, output slump, tepid employment growth, housing weakness and deficit in entrepreneurship—Immigration” (Strauss 2012, 3). Therefore, in 2015, policymakers sought to boost the city’s economy by making St. Louis an avenue for the resettlement of Syrian and Iraqi refugees. A study by the Fiscal Policy Institute reports that cities such as Detroit, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, and Nashville, all experienced economic growth thanks to their new refugee and immigrant residents. In Minneapolis, foreign-born residents opened 5,000 new businesses, while in Philadelphia, they opened more than 13,000 (Strauss 2012, 31). Most of these businesses were in poorer areas, resulting in economic growth for those neighborhoods needing it most. Today, St. Louis has and is projected to perform similarly.

Language Learning and Opportunity Costs

When refugees initially resettle in the United States, there are three main concerns: learning English, finding a job, and getting the children enrolled in school. Most resettlement agencies provide services that help with all three of these items, but the most difficult one to overcome is the language barrier. English courses are offered three times per week during the day and in the evenings at the local resettlement agency. Most of my interlocutor's husbands could not find the time to go to class before or after work. They either worked during the class time, or they are too exhausted to attend. However, with the children at school and the husbands working, this leaves refugee women with the most time to devote to English language learning. I saw the repercussions of this, especially in Radeyah's household. Although she had never received an education past 8th grade equivalency, she was a fantastic language student and became highly proficient in English in less than two years—something that takes other Arabic-speakers five to seven years. Her gift of language learning unknowingly gave her financial and social agency within her home. Now, she is the one who controls the finances. She calls the landlord about rent and the hospital about medical bills. She enrolls the children in school and even helps them with their homework. Radeyah's husband is an Uber driver with no English-speaking ability, and she could easily get a higher paying job. Radeyah's story is similar to other women who have gained agency through language learning, and what was once a Syrian Dream exclusively for men could now be a dream for women as well. The question is whether they will decide to take on the entrepreneurial role that has previously been reserved exclusively for men.

Juxtaposition on Arsenal Street

Over the course of the summer, I spent many nights in the townhouses on Arsenal Street. Situated side-by-side as neighbors, are two Syrian families—one from Damascus and one from Aleppo. Neither family is proficient in English, but the children act as translators. I met Hafsa's family (from Damascus) through an

acquaintance who told me that she wanted to start her own catering business. In the past, Hafsa had cooked for different supper clubs run by Americans, but now, she felt that she had the network of friends to do it herself. We met during Ramadan, and she invited me over for several late-night meals (Figure 4). Over bowls of *molokhia*, a legendary vegetable stew which translates to “for royalty,” I helped her develop business cards, set up an email account, and create a Facebook page. Hafsa has six kids ranging from six months to seventeen years old. When I asked her what she wanted her business to be called, she answered “Saarah's Kitchen” after her youngest daughter.



Figure 4. A typical Ramadan meal shared with Amira and her family. Photo by author.

One night after dinner, Hafsa invited her neighbor Nadira and her family (from Aleppo) over for coffee and *namoura*. Nadira, who was seven months pregnant, met me with open

arms and kisses on each cheek, then, dragging her oldest child, Mahdi, over to us, she promptly told him to translate an invitation to dinner and a request for English lessons. Because Nadira did not know her days of the week, it took us a while to settle on a time, but when I knocked on her door a few days later, she was ready for me (or she at least pretended to be). The layout of her house paired with the Islamic symbolism mirrored Hafsa's house. In the living room, four large couches, circled around three mismatched coffee tables that had been pushed together to create a long glass runner dividing the room in half. In addition to the family Qur'an on the mantle and a framed picture of the Kaaba in Mecca, Nadira's children had drawn pictures of their home in Syria paired with unfamiliar Arabic words in celebration of Ramadan. The two girls and two boys crowded by the window waiting for the sun to go down.

When it is time to eat, the kids pull the couch cushions onto the floor while Nadira and her husband, Hakeem, bound in carrying *yeb'rt*, *kibbeh*, and pita bread. During the meal, I notice a table-top sewing machine tucked back against the wall. After inquiring, Nadira tells me about her sewing experience in Syria. I suggest that she could easily get a job as a seamstress, but she immediately shuts that idea down. To her, a woman's primary job is to be at home caring for her children. I ask, "Nadira, what do you think about Hafsa wanting to start a business?" Nadira pauses to gather her thoughts. In the end, she tells me, with the help of her son, that she supports Hafsa as her friend, but "that life" was not for her.

Analysis

Each of these women, Amira, Radeyah, Hafsa, and Nadira, had to negotiate new cultural identities for themselves and decide whether or not that included employment. After living in the U.S. for a few years, Hafsa knew that she wanted to start her own business and began surrounding herself with both Syrian and American friends who could help her navigate that process. Similarly, Amira also wanted to start her own business either selling macramé or starting a catering company, but she was ultimately unable due to a combination of

structural barriers and her own fear for the future. Meanwhile, Radeyah and Nadira were somewhere in the middle. Radeyah had thought that she wanted to work, but she changed her mind when she started making more money than her husband. Similarly, Nadira fully supported her friend Hafsa with her catering business and would even help her make, deliver, and serve the food. Still, she could not take the next step towards pursuing "that life" for herself. Additionally, none of the women I spoke with mentioned that their husbands approved or disapproved of them working. The hesitancy along with the ultimate decision seemed to reside with each woman's unique convictions, worries, and perspectives.

Conclusion

While I lived in St. Louis, one aspect of my internship was to spend time with Syrian refugee women in order to understand what types of employment work best for their lifestyles regarding cultural values, religious values, and individual preferences. With this information, different programs could be designed to help refugee women enter the labor force in ways that were beneficial to them and their families. With the goal of financial independence in mind, ILAD, like refugee resettlement organizations, knew that refugee women were the untapped resource to lifting refugee communities out of poverty. However, as I conducted this study, I came to realize that while they may have similar backgrounds, my interlocutors would oftentimes come to very different conclusions concerning women's roles and what their social and cultural identities might include. As I have shown, Amira, Radeyah, Hafsa, and Nadira's decisions were each unique to their personal convictions and perspectives. Ultimately, this study highlights the ways that that refugee women assert themselves and their desires as they resettle in a new country, and it demonstrates that the negotiation of refugee women's social and cultural identities is not necessarily a process of becoming more like American women or more like who they or their female family members were in Syria. Instead, it is a process filled with hesitations, contradictions, and paths unique to each woman.

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