

# UNTOLD STORIES OF SYRIAN WOMEN SURVIVING WAR

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## Introduction

What is now known as the Syrian Uprising began in mid-March 2011 as a peaceful social movement in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. In a few months the Uprising shifted from peaceful demonstrations to an armed conflict, mainly, due to the military reaction of the Syrian regime to the demonstrations, and Syria became a location for a national, regional, and international power struggle (Salloukh, 2013). While Syrian women were a main segment of the Syrian Uprising, their representations in the global and social media are dominated by an image of a powerless female Syrian refugee who is a victim of her family's actions of selling daughters off for money. In this dominant media representation, Syrian refugee women are robbed of their agency and are constricted to a representation of a single faceless victim/woman. Such representation is no different from the longstanding depiction of Arab women in Western media and literature as suppressed sexual objects by oppressive violent men and in need of saving (Abu- Lughod, 2002; Alloula, 1986; Said, 1979; Todd, 1998). Transnational feminist scholarship tackles such themes of representation, power, voice, privilege, and marginalization by deconstructing the dominant discourse of history and knowledge and taking seriously the concept of agency of women in different cultures and geographical locations.

Thus this paper will incorporate transnational feminist scholarship (Mohanty, 1984; Mohanty, 2003; Bhattacharyya, 2008; Nordstrom, 2005) to argue that there is no singular category that fits all "Syrian refugee women" in contrast to the dominant representations of global and social media. In terms of outline, this paper will first analyze the generalized representations of Syrian refugee women in global and social media; second, narrate and analyze six stories of Syrian refugee women who represent different marginalized groups based on the intersection of their class, age, education, family status, and place of origin; and third, highlight the ways in which online media representations rob Syrian refugee women of their agency and invisibilize their complex and various stories of struggling for freedom, suffering from violence and war, and resisting inequality and injustice.

Methodologically this paper is based on a larger research project in which three qualitative methods were used for data collection: interviews, observation,

and discourse analysis. This paper mainly covers fieldwork that took place in Jordan during the summer of 2013. Through purposeful sampling and network sampling, I conducted thirty-three in-depth interviews and I engaged in approximately 100 hours of participant observation. From these thirty-three interviews, I chose in this paper to focus on stories of six Syrian refugee women who represent various class, age, education, family status, and place of origin backgrounds. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to producing academic knowledge that makes visible some of the untold stories of Syrian refugee women in Jordan.

## Transnational Feminism, Representations, and Marginalization

Transnational feminists engage in answering questions of representations, power, voice, privilege, and marginalization. They deconstruct the dominant discourse of history and knowledge, and take seriously the concept of agency of women in different cultures and geographical locations. According to transnational feminists, Western literature, including Western feminist literature, about women in developing countries is located in historical and colonial contexts of Western hegemony (McEwan, 2001; Mohanty, 2003). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) plays a pioneering role as a transnational feminist in analyzing and problematizing the dominant representations of non-Western women in Western literature. Specifically, Mohanty criticizes the "production of the 'Third World woman' as a singular monolithic subject" (p.333).

Many Western feminists represent the issues and concerns of non-Western women from a simplistic dichotomous understanding. In this view, non-Western societies are seen as groups of repressive men and victimized women (Mohanty, 2003). Such a view led to ignorance concerning the complexity of the intersection between class, race, nationality, and sexuality, and also the effects of the unequal global economy and colonial power relations between the Global North and the Global South. Mohanty (2003) also points out that the dominant discourse regarding women in the Global South is not only produced by Western intellectuals but also by scholars from developing countries who adopt the Western dominant discourse.

To counter the dominant representations about

women from vic groups, transnational feminists promote alternative ways of knowledge production. Such alternative ways aim to make visible the stories of women from marginalized groups by writing and incorporating the struggles and experiences of those women in the academic work. Transnational feminists challenge the dominant representations about women, especially in the Global South as a singular powerless victim. Mohanty (2003) invites us to take seriously the concept of the agency of women in different cultures and geographical locations. Representing non-Western women as a homogeneous group “robs them of their historical and political agency” (Mohanty, 2003, p.39). These representations objectify women in the Global South, and exclude as well as distort their long history of different resistant experiences against power hierarchies.

Mohanty further highlights the continuous domination of the singular, monolithic representation of women from the Global South in discourse about globalization. Mohanty admits that there is an emerging image of active women from the Global South, such as images of female “human rights” activists and advocates, yet she invites feminists to critically examine the new binary representations of victimized/empowered Global South women. In this sense, Mohanty raises the question of what systems of power and privilege among Global South women make a few voices seen as empowered and a majority of voices represented as victimized.

Times of conflict are a repeated example of a situation where women are represented as faceless, nameless, and powerless victims. For example, Nordstrom (2005) discusses that despite the participation of women in the 1983 riots against the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the media representation of these women was limited to an iconic image of a nameless pregnant woman disemboweled by terrorists. Nordstrom (2005) argues “the use of this image as an icon effectively obscures all the many women and girls who die and fight without recognition” (p.400). Similar to Nordstrom, Bhattacharyya (2008) assures that emphasizing the diverse and complex experiences and roles of women in war complicates and reveals the propaganda of the political powers in the West in claiming to rescue women in the Global South. Drawing on a transnational feminist perspective, I will analyze in the following section representative examples of global and social media dominant

representations about Syrian refugee women.

## **Dominant Representations of Syrian Refugee Women**

The representations of Syrian refugee women in global and social media are dominated by an image of a powerless female Syrian refugee who is a victim of her family’s actions of selling daughters off for money. I have analyzed three representative examples of global media dominant representations of Syrian refugee women’s issues in Jordan based on a Google web search of the phrase “Syrian refugee women.” The first article was published by BBC (McLeod, 2013, May 10) under the title “Syrian Refugees Sold for Marriage in Jordan,” the second article was published by CBS (Ward, 2013, May 15) under the title “Syrian Refugees Sell Daughters in Bid to Survive,” and the third article was published by ABC (Mark, 2013, May 22) under the title “Syrian Refugees Selling Daughters as Brides.” The titles of these three articles explicitly identify that Syrian families are selling/marrying their daughters off for money. These headlines tell the readers that, on the one hand, Syrian refugees are a backward people who sell their daughters at the first hardship they face, and on the other hand, Syrian refugee women are powerless victims of their uncivilized/barbaric society.

The BBC article is divided to three sections. The first section tells the story of Kazal, a young Syrian refugee woman who had been sold for marriage: “Kazal says she is 18 but looks much younger. She has just got divorced from a 50-year-old man from Saudi Arabia who paid her family about US \$3,100 (UK £2,000) to marry her. The marriage lasted one week” (McLeod, 2013, May 10, para. 2).

The article illustrated that Kazal’s eyes are blue to emphasise her Caucasian race “Her huge, blue eyes fill with tears when she talks about the marriage” (McLeod, 2013, May 10, para.4). The second section of the BBC article is an interview with Andrew Harper, the Representative of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Jordan who expressed his feelings of disgust for people who are engaged in marriage for money “I can’t think of anything more disgusting than people targeting refugee women...You can call it rape, you can call it prostitution, you can call it what you want but it’s preying on the weakest” (McLeod, 2013, May 10, para.10). The third section of the BBC article is an interview with Um Mazed,

a matchmaker who earns income by arranging marriages between Arab men and Syrian refugee girls. The CBS article is divided into two sections. The first section tells the story of Um Majed, a matchmaker who can be exactly identified as Um Mazed from the BBC article. Actually the article's writer just changed one letter in the woman's name (z instead of j). The CBS article starts with "Um Majed's cell phone rarely stops ringing these days. She calls herself a marriage broker; in reality, she sells Syrian girls to men looking for brides at bargain prices" (Ward, 2013, May 15, para.1). According to the article, Um Majed does not take any responsibility for her actions, and she blames the girls' families for selling their daughters. The second section of the CBS article, tells the story of "Seventeen-year-old Aya who fled Syria with her family just under a year ago. She was sold to a 70-year-old man from Saudi Arabia for \$3,500. He left her after a month" (Ward, 2013, May 15, para.7). This description is exactly like the BBC article's description of Kazal except Aya is 17, not 18; was married off to a 70-year-old man, not a 50-year-old man; for \$3,500, not \$3,100; and the marriage lasted one month not one week. The woman in the image that is posted in the CBS article of Aya matches the woman in the image of Kazal that was posted in the BBC article, a niqabi blue-eyed young woman with exactly the same make-up on her eyes.

The ABC article is an interview with Andrew Harper, the UNHCR's representative to the Kingdom of Jordan, who was interviewed for the aforementioned BBC article. The article starts with an opening about how Syrian women are being sold in Jordan: "Reports are emerging in Jordan that some of the Syrian women and girls in refugee camps there are being sold as brides. In some cases it seems, it is their families who are selling girls aged 16 and younger

for just a few thousand dollars to men from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States" (Mark, 2013, May 22, para.1). Later in the article when the writer asked Mr. Harper, "And now we're hearing stories that some women and young children indeed are being sold, they're ending up in arranged marriages, how is it working? What's happening?" Mr. Harper, the UNHCR's representative in Jordan, clarified that:

*"Sold is probably a very strong term. There are situations of dowry which is fairly traditional in many parts of the world and there can be agreements between families. But it is a situation where often the families will, due to their dire circumstances, see that they're not in a position to continue to care for the girl and they do get offers from other families or men who come along who sort of say 'look we wish to marry your daughter.'" (Mark, 2013, May 22, para. 6).*

What is described by Mr. Harper is a form of early marriage that commonly happens in rural communities in Syria. However, the ABC article ignored the information that was provided by Mr. Harper and echoed, in its title and in its opening, the same dominant discourse that was manifested in the BBC and the CBS articles.

Similar to the global media dominant representations, mainstream Syrian social media activism regarding Syrian refugee women's issues robs Syrian refugee women of their agency and constricts their sorties to a representation of a single faceless victim/woman. For example, on September 2, 2012, the Refugees not Captives (RNC) campaign management team posted "statement number 2" explaining why they chose "Refugee Not Captives" as a name for the campaign (Lajiaat Lasabaya, 2012). The image that accompanied the text portrayed a faceless profile of a woman and under the woman's head there are just two words "Refugees/ Lajiaat in Arabic" and "Not Captives/Lasabaya." The faceless profile space of the woman and the words "Not Captives/Lasabaya" are in red to emphasise the powerless victim status of the Syrian woman. The abstract image of the woman's hair and the word "Refugees/ Lajiaat in Arabic" are in black to symbolize the flowing passivity and the femininity of the weak state of being a refugee.

The text of "statement number 2" defended and explained why the RNC team chose "Captives/



Syrian women wait in line to receive aid from an Islamic relief agency at a refugee camp in the town of Ketermaya (AP)

Sabaya” in the campaign’s title. Here it is useful to mention that the Arabic language like the French language includes gender for all nouns and most pronouns. Sabaya “Captives” is a noun that was used in ancient Arab history to describe the female spoils of war who, based on their gender, were enslaved by the winners of any conflict. Sabaya “Captives” have historical sexual connotations that the women were enslaved in a war context for sexual purposes. This word is not used in contemporary Arabic similar to how words such as “Negro” are not acceptably used in the American context after the success of the civil rights movement. In “statement number 2”, the RNC campaign management team explained that they chose the word Sabaya “Captives” to, first, “cause shock for all people who feel empathy with the Syrian people”, second, “to fight those who want to marry Syrian women in exchange for money” under the pretext of rescuing them from being refugees. In fact, the RNC team stated that these marriages are enslaving women in the same way as if they were spoils of war. I recognise the good intentions in the RNC campaign discourse when the RNC team claims to defend the Syrian women’s rights in marriage, and when they ask Arab men to donate money to build schools for young girls instead of marrying them off. However, similar to the BBC, CBS, and ABC representations, the RNC team used dominant representations to generalise about Syrian women and men. Syrian refugee women are robbed of their agency and constricted to a representation of a single faceless victim/woman. More importantly Syrian women’s concerns and stories were not only minimised to forced marriage in exchange for money but also there was exaggeration of the volume of the forced marriage phenomenon, while ignoring the power structures that rule refugee families. To challenge the dominant representations of Syrian refugee women, the next section is devoted to actual Syrian refugee women’s stories.

## Untold Stories of Syrian Women Surviving War

The dominant representations of Syrian refugee women invisibilize the political and economic relationship issues as well as structural inequalities that impacted the ways Syrian women experienced the process of becoming a refugee. This article aims to make visible untold stories of Syrian women fighting for freedom and surviving the war. I narrate and analyze six stories of Syrian refugee women

in Jordan who represent different marginalized groups, based on the intersection of their class, age, education, family status, and place of origin.

The six stories of Syrian refugee women include:

1. Rim (26), an activist who descended from a middle class Damascene family;
2. Karima (40), a housewife from a lower class Homs family;
3. Mona (30), a warrior from a small village in the Dara’a Governorate;
4. Sima (52), a fashion and crafts designer and trainer from Al-Tall, a small city in Rif Dimashq Governorate;
5. Hala (21), an activist and citizen journalist from a Damascene upper middle class family;
6. Maha (40), a housewife from a poor small village in the Dara’a Governorate.

Methodologically, these stories are based on in- depth interviews with each individual Syrian refugee woman, which took place in Jordan during the summer of 2013. For the interview process with Rim, Hala, and Sima, I interviewed them in public or private places that they identified, but I also accompanied them as they went about their activist activities. Unlike the previous three interviewees, I met Karima and Mona once and Maha twice. I interviewed Karima and Mona at their homes; Karima’s interview was facilitated by two members of the Molham Volunteering Team, and Mona’s interview was facilitated by one member of the Relief Syrian Refugees in Jordan group. Maha’s interview took place in the Za’atari refugee camp with the assistance of Syrian humanitarian activists who helped me gain access to the Za’atari camp in order to interview women within the safety of the Qatar Red Crescent. Through the process of interviewing and communicating with refugee women, my own positionality as a Syrian woman and human rights activist, who left Syria in the summer of 2012 and currently resides in the United States to complete graduate studies, played a significant role in building trust to share mutual stories about surviving the conflict and fear for loved ones who are still in Syria. The analysis of the following six stories highlights what it means to be a refugee woman in Jordan and emphasizes that there is no singular category that fits all “Syrian refugee women” in contrast to the mainstream online media representations that robbed Syrian refugee women of their agency and invisibilized their struggle, suffering, and resistance.

## Rim's story

Rim (26) is a representative of students and young people who participated in the social movements of the Arab Spring. When the Syrian Uprising began, Rim was completing her post-graduate studies in Accounting at Damascus University. She immediately engaged in organizing peaceful demonstrations, citizen media activism, and humanitarian aid activities to regions under attack and siege by the Syrian regime forces. Her middle class Sunni Damascene family knew about her activism, and they supported her choices regardless of the fact that none of her parents are politically active. Rim is a middle child in a family consisting of five children, two boys and three girls. In April 2012, Rim and her activist friends were about to drive back to their homes after a successful demonstration in Damascus City. While Rim and her male friend entered the car, Rim looked back toward her two female friends to check why they did not get into the car yet. She saw her two friends being dragged away by their hair by a police officer. It was a decision of life or death. Helping the two girls meant not only to endanger themselves but also their families and networks. Rim's friend drove away. During that month most of Rim's network who worked in media and humanitarian activism were arrested. The security forces twice broke into her parents' house, where she lived, searching for her. At that time Rim lived with the daily challenge of communicating with her friends' families to inform them that their children were arrested or died under torture. Rim's last day in Syria was May 8, 2012. She left Syria illegally:

*I could not stay any longer! I considered staying inside Syria a selfish decision that put my whole family under great danger. My family was very worried when I was living my every day hiding in different places. They tried to check whether I can leave the country legally, but my name was placed on the border check-points on the Syrian regime wanted lists. Two days before the day I escaped Syria, an activist friend of mine was arrested while she was trying to leave Syria legally to go to Lebanon. I contacted some activists in Dara'a and went there through side-roads to avoid the regime's checkpoints alongside the main roads.*

Rim stayed in Dara'a for four hours. She was alone. She did not know any one. The group she escaped with included mostly families, with many single

mothers and their children. Rim said, "The mothers tried to look strong and relaxed; they did not want their children to feel fear and insecurity." The group started their trip in the dark guided by moonlight. There were a few men from the Syrian Free Army walking with them for protection. It was Rim's first trip outside Syria. Rim described her feelings:

*It was a nightmare! I wished I could wake up and see myself in my house with my mother and siblings! Or in my bedroom looking at Qasioun Mountain! We were walking in orchards not knowing on what we were stepping. The Jordanian Army was at the border to help us cross into Jordan. There was a small hill that we had to climb, and a Jordanian soldier held out his hand to help us up it. When the soldier extended his hand, I wanted to pull my hand back! I wanted to go back! But I did nothing! I knew I must save my life and not risk my family's safety!*

Similar to all other refugees, when Rim entered Jordan, she submitted her Syrian ID card but she kept her passport because she was planning to leave Jordan to go to Bahrain with her elder brother who works there and would come to Jordan to meet her. At 4 a.m. Rim arrived at Al- Bashabsha Camp<sup>1</sup>. She was "psychologically devastated." She bought a mobile phone card and called her brother. He had come from Bahrain, but could not come immediately and pick her up. Her brother did not know when she would arrive, and now asked her to spend the night at the camp and said that he would come to meet her in the morning.

Rim was both the only Damascene person in the refugee camp and the only single young woman. The other refugees were either from Dar'a or from Homs. To make Rim feel secure, a woman from Homs invited her to join her and her children in their room. Rim slept in the Homs woman's room, "I slept very deeply! I do not think I have slept so deeply since that night! I was so tired and sad wishing to go back to Damascus." The rest of Rim's family, her parents and siblings, followed her to Jordan. Now, all of them live in a rented apartment in the suburbs of Amman. When I interviewed Rim in June 2013, she had been in Jordan for one year:

*One year goes so fast! I overcame my psychological devastation through volunteer work! I feel that volunteer work filtered my soul! When I help someone to smile, I feel*

*positive energy and that I am continuing my activism for the Syrian Revolution! I feel that I am participating in building Syria's future!*

Rim's strategy to survive the Syrian war and to cope with everyday life in her refugee destination was to actively volunteer in different humanitarian activist organizations which work in the Za'atri Refugee Camp and Amman region. Her work is mainly focused on psychological support for women and children. She sought training in this area with one of the international organizations in Jordan, and she also developed psychological support expertise through her work with her colleagues in an informal Syrian activist organization in Jordan. As a young, educated woman who descended from a middle class Damascene family, Rim's privileges continue to benefit her in Jordan. Such privileges make media coverage of Syrian refugee women's stories invisibilize Rim as a refugee woman because she does not fit dominant representations about refugee women as powerless poor victims. However, stories such as Rim's story have relative visibility in media coverage about Syrian activism; nevertheless one should keep in mind that such visibility is generally introduced to the audience out of the context of the refugee crisis.

### **Karima's story**

Karima (40) is not the type of Syrian heroine that the mainstream media would like to interview. She did not participate in the Syrian Uprising. She did not lead a demonstration. In fact, she did not have anti-government sentiments in the first place. Karima is a Syrian woman from Homs City who lived a "simple life." She got married early in her life, around the age of 15, as many of the girls in her poor, conservative neighborhood would face as a destiny. Therefore, she did not finish her education. Karima had five children including two girls: Soha (20) who is married, Lama (15) who Karima referred to proudly on several occasions as being extremely smart and good at school and three boys: Mahmood (18), Raheem (11), and Kamal (5).

On March 12, 2012, Karima's life would change forever. Around noon she heard that a mission from the Syrian Army is searching the houses in her neighborhood for armed men. She prayed that they would not take her boys and husband because they were not involved in any military activities. Around 2.00 p.m. the mission entered their apartment asking them to surrender

their weapons. Her husband declared that they had no weapons. The officer ordered his soldiers to take her husband out. Another officer took her eldest son Mahmood (18) and he forced him to prostrate himself to Bashar al-Assad's photograph in front of his mother and siblings<sup>2</sup>. Then, they commanded Karima and her smaller children (a girl and two boys) to stay inside while they took the father and the son Mahmood with them. In a few minutes, Karima and her children heard gunshots. Karima held herself together because she was worried about the safety of her younger children.

Her husband's dead body was left next to their flat door, and her son was left dying on the stairs after they shot him in the head. Karima remembered how his flesh and blood had dispersed and stuck to the walls around him. Her daughter Lama (15) tried to give Mahmood water before he died because he was muttering "water," but he could not drink it. Karima told me this with a big sigh that even her son's last wish did not come true: "My daughter came back inside; her hands were covered with Mahmood's blood. I kissed her hands and I smelled my son scent." When the army mission finished investigating the building, they came again to Karima's apartment. She locked the door. They unlocked it by shooting it. Karima described her feelings at that moment:

*I thought that our lives had come to an end. They were confused and shouting what they will do with the women. Thanks be to God they did not touch my daughter or me. I tried to strengthen my young boys. They were shaking and traumatised. The soldiers kept us for a half an hour and after that wandered in the building. When they finally exited our building, they shot Mahmood in the heart. He passed away then. I decided to leave my house under cover of the dark.*

Karima described her daughter Lama's actions proudly: "Lama was so brave. She pulled the bodies of her brother and father into the house and covered them with white sheets. Around 5:30 p.m. we left our house forever. We left the door open hoping that good people would find the bodies and bury them."

It was winter and dark, and Karima, who has no experience in public spaces, felt scared and decided to stay the night at one of her neighbour's houses. When they entered her neighbour's house, they saw another dead body of a stranger. Karima learned that the

regime forces killed all men in her neighborhood, and they randomly threw all the dead bodies into different houses. They do so to ensure that the rest of the families are terrorized and humiliated and other anti-regime regions would look at this example and understand the consequences of rebelling against the regime. Once again Lama covered the dead body with a sheet, so the small children would stop looking at the body that was shattered by bullets. Karima continued her story:

*At 6:30 in the morning we left the neighbor's house, the regime forces were shooting toward our feet and screaming at us to go back. I gestured with my hand that it is impossible to go back. We kept running through the shooting, and sometimes we hid in some buildings, but there were dead bodies in every building. When we passed our neighborhood, we met armed rebels. I expressed my disappointment with the rebels because they did not confront and fight the regime troops. But the rebel leader told me to thank God because no one touched my daughter or me and we had escaped with our honour. He said in the nearby neighborhood most women were raped.*

From that point Karima's displacement journey went through many stops. In Homs Governorate, Karima and her children went first to Safsafeh village, but she did not feel safe there. Thus, they moved to Khaldiahe where there were mortar shells falling in the area. So they moved to Baiiada and then to KafrAya where Karima's family live. Karima stayed at her parents' house for 40 days, but the daily sounds of shooting made her more nervous. She psychologically broke down. She informed her parents that she was leaving Homs Governorate and moving to Set Zaynab in Rif Dimashq Governorate where her sister-in-law had an available empty house where Karima and her children could stay. Karima stayed there for a few weeks and finally was able to sleep at night without the sound of shooting. However, Karima said that in the summer of 2012 around the second week in the month of Ramadan<sup>3</sup>, Syrian regime missiles started falling on Set Zaynab, and 300 people died. She was displaced again with her children to Khan Alshe<sup>4</sup>, where they stayed for 17 days at a school. Many schools in Syria were transformed from their original mission to become a refuge for the displaced people who had no place else to sleep. The living conditions were so frustrating that Karima decided to go back to Homs Governorate. For two and a half months she stayed in

Eastern Al Jadidah in Homs, an area that was under the Syrian regime control. Soon, a checkpoint for the Syrian regime troops was built right next to her house. From this checkpoint the soldiers launched missiles into the opposition neighborhoods. Despite these obstacles Karima and her children stayed for a little bit until an additional challenge faced them.

Karima described the day when her life destabilised again. She smiled slightly as she reported to me that her daughter Lama was watching Addounia TV<sup>5</sup>:

*I was walking with my two little boys in the park next to my home. My daughter Lama was alone at home watching Addounia's series "Sabaia"<sup>6</sup>, when I saw soldiers entering our house. I was terrified that they will do something to my daughter. I ran to the house to see that they were interrogating my other daughter Soha who had just arrived with her husband for a visit. I whispered in Lama's ears to delete all the TV channels and turn the TV off<sup>7</sup>.*

Karima clarified to me that now she can tell these stories and she is fine thanks to the love and support of the Molham Volunteering Team<sup>8</sup>, but at that time when Lieutenant "Samer" interrogated her, her eyes were always red and her face was extremely tired. Lieutenant Samer asked Karima where her husband was, she replied that he was working in Lebanon<sup>9</sup>. Samer accused Karima of being a liar, a killer, and a terrorist, and he told her to appear for an in-depth investigation at his office in two hours. Karima said good-bye to her children thinking that she was going to her death. She went to Samer's office with her son-in-law. Karima felt terrified and shy at the same time while she was entering Samer's office and the soldiers were looking at her with judgmental eyes. Karima described her experience with Samer:

*He was feeling bored and wanted to mock someone for fun and he found me. He kept accusing me of being a killer and a terrorist. I kept silent first. I am not used to speaking with men! In my community women do not generally communicate with men or confront them. But later, I negotiated with Samer. I told him 'okay, if I am a killer, why do you not let me go back to my home and keep an eye on me until you confirm that I am a killer'. He agreed with my suggestion, but then tried to start interrogating my son-in-law who was so*

*afraid that he did not say a word. To rescue him, I interfered and claimed that he is deaf. Samer believed me, and we went back home alive.*

With tears in her eyes, Karima said that she prostrated to God for half an hour to thank Him for surviving again<sup>10</sup>. After this incident Karima decided to leave Syria and go to Jordan's refugee camp. She did not change her mind even when the next day First Lt. Zaidon called to try to make up with her because of Samer's annoying behavior (Karima clarified that he is Samer's boss and that he, like Samer, is Alawite by sect) Karima described her meeting with First Lt. Zaidon the next day:

*First Lt. Zaidon asked me to forgive them. He had his six-year-old son with him, and he asked me to pray for his son. First Lt. Zaidon is a good man not like Samer. But, I could not trust him and I did not open my heart. When he kept asking me to tell him my wishes and he will try to make them come true. I told him my only wish right now is to leave Homs and go to Damascus. He said that I can leave and that he hopes that I meet good people on my way for the sake of my orphaned children.*

Karima did not wait until the next morning to leave. In the afternoon of that same day she left Homs City and headed to Jordan with her children. Their trip lasted a few weeks from Homs to Kazaz in Damascus to Jordan. In Damascus, they waited for 12 days because the road was closed due to explosions. Then they continued heading south toward Dara'a Governorate where they traversed Tafas, Al-Ajameh, and Tiba, then on November 5, 2012 they crossed the border into Za'atri Refugee Camp in Jordan. Karima who had grown up in a city described her experience in the Za'atri Refugee Camp in the desert:

*It was a shocking experience! I stayed in Za'atri for three months and ten days. There I met the Molham Volunteering Team, who used to visit me and help me financially. They are like my children! After three months and ten days, my tent collapsed from the rain and we could not live in it anymore. I escape from Za'atri illegally with the help of another Syrian family. My refugee tent was my life tragedy!*

In comparison with other Syrian refugee women, Karima's story had a happy ending. Later, the Molham

Volunteering Team contacted her and helped her to rebuild her life in Amman. They matched her with a Palestinian-Jordanian family who officially sponsored her, gave her an available apartment that they owned, and helped her to register her children in school. Additionally, the Molham Volunteering Team found a Qatari woman who provided monthly financial support for Karima's family.

Karima's strategy to survive the Syrian War and to cope with everyday life in her refugee destination was to challenge her traditional gender role and lack of experience in public spaces and resist long stages of injustice and internal and external displacement. As an uneducated mother from a poor urban region, Karima went through a significant, mostly depressing transformation when she became a female head of a household. Thus, Karima represents one of the categories of Syrian refugee women most in need of help and support from organizations that provide financial and psychological resources. One should note that in comparison with the other five Syrian refugee women stories that are presented here, the place of origin plays a huge role in Karima's suffering and in her long internal and external displacement journey. Coming from an urban poor conservative Homs environment, Karima's life experiences were limited to the border of her house. Although women, like Mona<sup>11</sup>, also came from a poor, conservative environment, their rural origins equip them with experiences in the public space through mainly working in farming. Additional challenges related to the place of origin are the geographical proximity of Jordan's borders. Travelling from Dara'a, Rif Dimashq, or Damascus governorates was relatively more manageable than travelling from Homs Governorate especially because, depending on the time and place of departure, the sectarian tension and armed confrontation in Homs were comparatively higher than in Dara'a, Rif Dimashq, or Damascus.

## **Mona's Story**

Mona is a warrior (both figuratively and literally) who does not match the mainstream media and Refugee Not Campaign's representations of Syrian refugee women as passive powerless victims in the ongoing conflict. Mona (30 years old) is from a small village in Dara'a Governorate. She studied just until the sixth grade, and got married at the age of 15 as did most of the girls in her village. She has an 11-year-old daughter who has growth hormone deficiency

disorder and thus physically appears to be 7.

**Mona actively participated in the armed rather than peaceful phase of the Syrian Uprising. She used to work smuggling defected soldiers from the Al-Assad regime's army and helped many of them join the Free Syrian Army (FSA).**

When I interviewed Mona, she resided with many members from her close and extended family in a small modest apartment on the outskirts of Amman. Unlike many other women and activists who I interviewed, Mona actively participated in the armed rather than peaceful phase of the Syrian Uprising. She used to work smuggling defected soldiers from the Al-Assad regime's army and helped many of them join the Free Syrian Army (FSA). She was also an informant for the FSA and had a satellite phone in order to communicate with them and inform them about the Syrian regime's military locations that they should target. When most of her female relatives and friends left her village seeking refuge in Jordan, Mona was one of very few women who stayed in the village working alongside the male fighters in the FSA. Mona confessed that Al-Assad regime army was tolerant, at the beginning, with women, and the soldiers did not investigate or suspect women. Therefore she and another woman used to hide weapons and ammunition under their clothes and thus passed the regime's checkpoints without inspections. However, Mona's actions were uncovered by the regime, and her name, among other women's names, was placed on the wanted people lists. At that time, Mona's father, who supported his daughter's engagement with the revolution begged her to leave Syria. Realizing the increased danger, Mona escaped Syria with her 11-year-old daughter before the regime had the chance to arrest her.

Mona did not tell me an exact timeframe for her story because of different security issues regarding her husband and father who are still fighting in Syria with the FSA. She left Dara'a Governorate with approximately 1500 persons heading to Jordan during a night when the regime launched an intensive bombardment of her region. They walked for four hours under the bombing to reach the Jordanian borders. A group of Free Syrian Army soldiers accompanied them, and they gave the children sleep-inducing drugs to prevent them from crying and thus disclosing their location to

the Al-Assad regime troops. Mona stayed in the Za'atri Refugee Camp for 12 days, and then she fled from the camp with her extended family who were already in the camp. She described her experience at the camp:

*The Jordanian army welcomed us at the border and took us via buses to the camp. When I saw the reception tent and that we will sleep on the bare ground, I was shocked. I wanted to go back to Syria. We were given a thin sleeping mattress, a pillow, a blanket, and a meal for each individual. It was so freezing cold, and the blanket did not warm us! I gathered all the young children in my family around me and tried to put all our blankets together as layers to warm us a little more!*

The direct reason for Mona and her family to escape the camp was, similar to Karima's reason, the snowstorm that hit Za'atri Camp in the winter of 2013. The storm crushed their tents. Mona and her extended family slept in one of the camps' school buildings for three days. When they went back to their tent locations, the tents had been stolen<sup>12</sup>. The family escaped Za'atri with the help of an activist group.

In Jordan, Mona had to face daily economic insecurities that took away her time and reduced her quality of life. It was true that Mona and her family escaped Za'atri but this did not mean that they survived the frustrating housing conditions. Mona and her daughter shared a one-bedroom apartment with several members from Mona's extended family, which included Mona's mother, Mona's mother-in-law, Mona's two brothers with their wives and children. The apartment rent was 140 JD (about \$200) per month and the monthly bills such as electricity and water exceeded 13 JD. In Jordan, a Syrian legal work permit in Jordan is extremely difficult and expensive to obtain. So people such as Mona's brothers were subject to shadow work exploitation (they worked illegally in construction jobs). The UN aid plus what Mona's brothers earned was very far from enough to provide the family with enough income for survival. Despite this challenging housing condition, Mona and her family do not wish to ever go back to the Za'atri camp.

A few months before I interviewed Mona, she was with her mother-in-law who had a diabetes medical checkup at Akilah Hospital<sup>13</sup>. In the hospital corridor, Mona was waiting with her daughter when a man called Amr approached them to say that he helps Syrian

women without a male provider. Amr told Mona that he has apartments available for such women that were donated through a philanthropist. Mona was attracted to the idea but before going with the man to see the apartments, she covertly called her brother to inform him about the situation. Once Mona left the hospital with Amr, 11 other women also in the hospital did the exact same thing. The man grouped them based on their Syrian region of origin. Mona and her daughter were grouped in a taxi with three other women from Dar'a. In the other two taxies were 4 women from Homs and 4 from Damascus' outskirts. The promised place was in Al-Zarqa Al-jadidah<sup>14</sup>. When Mona got into to the taxi, Amr was in the same car as she was. He called the apartments' donator to inform him that he "has good news" and that he "brought women from Dar'a." Mona felt insecure about this call, and she felt that the man's accent and tone had changed when he talked on the phone. She whispered in her daughter's ear to pretend to play with their mobile phone and to take a photo of Amr. Mona's daughter did that, and they had the photo. Amr told the women in the taxi that he just has checks and no cash and asked them to pay now for the taxi and he would reimburse them once they arrive. Mona paid her only 5 JD (about \$7) and was left without money. The car took different long side roads, so Mona was not able to memorize the travel route. When they arrived to the promised apartments, Mona and the other women discovered that they were brought to a house for prostitution. An old man was running the place and he was angry with Amr when he discovered that Amr brought older married women with him not young virgin women. Mona was furious. She urged the other women to not eat or drink anything<sup>15</sup>. She threatened Amr and the old man with actions by Free Syrian Army. The old man said that they do not force women to prostitution and they are free to go. Mona and the other women left without any money. They walked a few blocks until they saw a shop where the owner felt solidarity with the women and gave them money to pay for a taxi to take them back to Amman. Mona told her story to a Jordanian Palestinian male activist, who is known to be connected to international media, asking him to publish the mobile photo of Amr and warn other women and the authorities about him. The male activist took Mona's mobile phone, transferred the photo to his mobile phone, and then deleted it from Mona's phone. Mona was left without evidence and she was not able to continue her attempts to

investigate the case of Amr and the prostitution house.

Mona's strategy to survive the Syrian War was manifested in different forms of resisting political and patriarchal oppression in both Syria and Jordan. In Syria, she did not only challenge her traditional gender role by smuggling both small arms and defected soldiers but also she was an active participant in the armed conflict by working as an informant for the FSA and engaging in military planning. As an uneducated mother from a poor rural region, Mona already had experiences in public spaces inside Syria through working in farming for almost her whole life and later through working with the FSA. Thus, when she arrived in Jordan, it was more likely that she would embrace her new role and life easily and quickly in comparison with women who were from her same class but from urban regions and thus may have lacked experiences in public spaces. Such experiences empowered Mona to act appropriately and immediately when she was trapped in the prostitution network. However, similar to all other refugees from lower classes, Mona continued to suffer from severe daily economic insecurity in Jordan and increasing hostility from the hosting community.

### **Sima's Story**

Sima (52) is an example of skilled refugee women who moved to Jordan with proficient expertise but they were marginalized from Syrian mainstream activist organizations because of their place of origin and age. Sima is a widow from Al-Tall, a small city in Rif Dimashq Governorate. Sima got married to a male cousin at the age of 17. It was a first-cousin marriage, thus two of Sima's six children have mental and physical disabilities. Once Sima got married she moved with her husband to Saudi Arabia where her husband was working. She got her Baccalaureate certificate (high school) a few months after her marriage, and then she fulfilled her passion in pursuing courses in fashion design. A few years before the Syrian Uprising had started, Sima and her family went back to Syria where she established a fashion and crafts design training institute in her hometown Al-Tall. Sima's children have professions in medical, engineering, and teaching. When the Syrian Uprising began, all Sima's children were involved in it.

## **All Sima's children stayed involved in the Syrian Uprising, and they joined the Free Syrian Army groups in Damascus.**

One of Sima's children, Nizar had "an identity crisis for many years," and he joined contradictory extremist groups. Nizar joined a Satanist extremist religious group while he was attending medical school for surgery in Jordan. Because of this, his family transferred him to a university in Bahrain where this time he joined a branch of Al-Qaeda and through them got involved in terrorist bombings in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi government imprisoned him, and later he was transferred to a Syrian prison in Damascus. Thus, in mid-March when the Syrian Uprising started, Nizar's name was immediately placed on the most-wanted lists regardless of the fact that he had abandoned his affiliation with Al-Qaeda. However, Nizar along with 15 other persons from Al-Tall participated in one of the Umayyad Mosque early demonstrations in Old Damascus. Sima accused Nizar's uncle of reporting him to the intelligence. Nizar was imprisoned again and severely tortured. March 25, 2011 was the first time Sima was requested for interrogation. On the one hand, the Syrian intelligence aimed at terrorising Sima to disclose any information about her son's activities, and on the other hand, to put pressure on her son to cooperate with them. Nizar was released early in June 2011 after Bashar al-Assad issued a general amnesty that covered political prisoners. Though such harassment of Sima by Syrian intelligence did not stop. All Sima's children (male and female) stayed involved in the Syrian Uprising, and they joined the Free Syrian Army groups in Damascus suburbs where they all carried out tasks of fighting and/or securing medical assistance in field hospitals. Thus, Sima was continuously a subject of security harassment and interrogation.

In September 2012, Sima's house and her son Nizar's house were invaded by the Syrian security, stealing everything, and destroying what they could not take. Her son Nizar's house was burned.

Sima showed me pictures of her house and family. She was sad as she pointed to a handmade carpet that she had made in 1987 and which was stolen on that day. Late in September 2012, Sima left Syria for good legally to Jordan to stay at a female cousin's house. Sima explained her moving to Jordan:

*I wanted to travel to stay with my foster daughter by breastfeeding<sup>16</sup> in Saudi Arabia. While I was waiting for the visa, I sought activities that I could do to serve the revolution and the refugees. I was excited that a group of women learned about my work and they wanted me to find a place and be the manager of a workshop similar to the fashion and crafts design training institute that I ran in Syria. The aim was to train refugee women to produce handicrafts and then generate income by selling them. I found this a great work opportunity. I had no money. We are not a poor family, but we invested all our money in serving the revolution.*

Sima's excitement turned to frustration very soon. Her female cousin was not happy with what seemed like professional success that Sima was achieving. In the beginning, she stole Sima's money, and then suddenly she threw Sima out of her house in the middle of the night. With so little money, Sima walked through the streets of Amman until she reached the Al-Ammer building where there are rooms for cheap rent. The building had no rooms that were available. The Egyptian concierge who was working through the night told Sima she could safely stay in his room until the morning. The next day, Sima met a woman from Dara'a who told her that she can move into her apartment with her. Sima's visa to Saudi Arabia was on hold as were all other Syrian citizens' visas for the Arabian gulf countries, and the fact that Sima had lived there for more than 20 years and had a foster daughter there did not help her. Inside the Syrian women's organization that Sima worked with, she became frustrated and felt marginalized. She was underpaid, and the employers did not put her in charge of the crafts project as they had promised. The director of the organization was a young Syrian woman who was raised and educated in the United Kingdom, and she had descended from an upper middle class Damascene family. Although Sima had supervised the selection of furniture and other equipment for their workshop space, the director hired project managers who were Western-educated Syrian women who had no experience in working inside Syria with lower class women. Sima expressed her opinion: "We started the Syrian Revolution because we wanted to get rid of classicism and for all of us to become equals. They underestimated me, ignored my experiences and treated me as if I am nobody." Furthermore, Sima had a dispute with her flat mate over the rent. Her flat mate wanted her to pay the entire

rent for both of them because Sima was working. As a result, Sima moved to Raghadan Complex in Amman where many Syrian refugee families resided. When Sima worked with refugee women in both Amman and Za'atri Refugee Camp, that give her fulfillment. However, Sima's poor living conditions in a small room without basic appliances such as a refrigerator as well as the marginalization at work made her make plans to travel to Egypt before the beginning of the month of Ramadan in 2013. I interviewed Sima two days before her scheduled flight to Cairo.

Sima's strategy to survive the Syrian War was her attempt to recruit her own skills and talents in Jordan to make a living, on the one hand, and to serve other refugee women and the broader cause of the "Syrian Revolution," on the other hand. However, because of her age, rural origin, and lack of proper education, Sima's attempt was restricted and marginalized by the Syrian women's organizations that she tried to work with. As a Syrian woman from a rural upper-middle class family, Sima's family wealth was embodied in owning properties and land rather than having money in cash or in bank accounts. Therefore, in Jordan, she lacked money to live comfortably and thus depended on relatives and other people close to her to secure housing. However, later even relatives and people who were close to her rejected her. Such rejections highlight the ways in which host communities' attitudes change from welcoming refugees at the beginning of the crisis to rejection and hostility later. In Sima's case when her situation became significantly depressing, her privilege enabled her to move to Egypt to stay at a house owned by her family.

## Hala's Story

Hala's story is like one of many Syrian journalists' stories who were detained and tortured in prisons during the Syrian Uprising<sup>17</sup>. Hala is 21 years old. She is from a political family. Her father was one of the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Hama City during the 1980s, and since then he lives in exile in Saudi Arabia. Hala did not seem committed to her father's political Islamic heritage. She is secular and does not wear any religious symbols. Hala lived in Damascus with her two brothers and mother. They had a Damascene upper middle class life. However, Hala's family life changed sharply after the Syrian Uprising. Her two brothers were detained early in the uprising. One of them

died under torture and the other one is still in prison.

Since the beginning of the revolution Hala worked as a journalist. She filmed news reports covering the peaceful phase of the revolution and the activism of youth and college students. She sent her video reports to Arabic news channels such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. She also organized demonstrations and delivered humanitarian aid. In July 2012, many of the activists and journalists in Hala's circle were arrested. She left her house and lived in hiding for seven months in a female cousin's house. Hala's cousin was married to a high-profile Syrian government employee and lived in a fancy pro-regime neighborhood. Hala's cousin-in-law did not know about her revolutionary activism, just his wife did. On February 10, 2013, one of Hala's last activist colleagues who had not fled Syria, been killed, or been imprisoned called Hala from a "fake number"<sup>18</sup>. He told her that he was in great danger and asked her if he could come and hide in her mother's house. Hala agreed. When they arrived at Hala's family house, Hala's friend made a long call (more than 16 minutes) from his "fake number." This long call was the reason that the security forces were able to locate his location. The intelligence agents came searching the building for him. Hala helped him escape through the roof of her building, but the security forces captured him. He immediately confessed about Hala. The security forces invaded Hala's house. They broke everything and they stole all the money (around \$10,000) and valuable possessions including Hala's cameras and videotapes that she used in her media activism. The security forces arrested Hala along with her friend. They accused them of being armed terrorists. They took Hala in one car and her friend in another. As soon as they put Hala in the car, the verbal and physical harassment started. When they arrived at the Forty Intelligence Center in the White Bridge neighborhood, an agent gave her a dagger and ordered her to stab her friend to prove loyalty to the regime. Hala refused, and she denied that she knew "her friend." The agent took the dagger and stabbed Hala's friend in the back. They severely beat Hala and then took her to a separate room. There, Hala was subjected to a technique of torture called Strappado. Her wrists were tied with a rope behind her back and then she was suspended in the air for six hours. After one and half hours, she lost consciousness. When they let her down, they threw her body over flour bags and four men hit her small body extremely hard with rifle shoulder stocks. After that they put

her in a tiny single cell (Monfareda in Arabic)<sup>19</sup>. Hala was tortured with various interrogation techniques such as electric shock, sexual assault, threat of rape and shaming, and food deprivation. Hala described her experience in a low and shy voice:

*They severely hit me and harassed me. They said they would rape me! It is so difficult for a girl's psyche to be subject to all of that. They made me feel that they knew everything about my most personal life details. They threatened that they would inform my family that I was not a virgin and that I was a slut who slept with the Free Syrian Army soldiers.*

Hala stayed in the Forty Intelligence Center for two nights in which she did not sleep due to the unbearable conditions of the single cell but also because of the sounds of torturing other detainees around her. Yet what was most difficult was that the intelligence agents put her friend in the facing cell where they tortured him day and night. From the Forty Intelligence Center Hala and her friend were transferred to Al-Khatib Intelligence Branch. Hala emphasised that Al-Khatib Branch was “a horrible place that there are no words to describe.” The intelligence agents forced Hala on her knees to climb down seven floors of stairs located underground until they reached the single cell where they imprisoned her again. Hala was then subjected to three days of interrogation and torture to force her to name and locate all the networks of activists and journalists that she knew. Hala was born with a heart disease. The methods of torture that the intelligence agents tried on Hala and her friend were significantly harsh. For example, they were subjected to the Chair of Torture, where their wrists, neck, and feet were tied to a chair and then water and electricity were thrown on their bodies to be electrocuted. Hala was able to smell the burning nails and hair. She temporarily lost her sight for 24 hours, and she started bleeding from her nose. Furthermore, Hala was food and water deprived for four successive days. On the fourth day in the middle of the night, she cried loudly for any food or water. A patrol of two persons came. One gave her a little water. So she asked for little food too. The other person caught one of the cockroaches that were running around in her cell and put it in her mouth forcing her to eat it as food. After three hours Hala was still muttering “food.” A watchman came with a steel can of rotten food that could not be open without a can opener. Hala complained asking how she was supposed to open it. Her nails

were long. The watchman mocked her asking to open it with her fingernails. When she answered that it is “impossible,” he called his fellow guards to come and watch. He ripped off her first two fingernails. She lost consciousness while he ripped off the rest<sup>20</sup>. The psychological and physical torture, especially the beating on her lower abdomen, caused Hala to have a gynecological hemorrhage for a month and 18 days. After 8 days of torture, the head of the Al-Khatib Intelligence Branch was checking the detainees when he saw Hala bleeding and about to die. He ordered her to be transferred to a civilian prison. In the process, Hala was asked to confess on the Syrian national news channel that she was a terrorist and that she regretted her deeds, but she refused. Then, she was transferred to the Terrorism Court. There, one of the employees recognized her and called her well-connected cousin. Hala's family came in one hour after the call, they paid 150,000 Syrian pounds (around \$3,000), and Hala was released. Hala went to stay in a cousin's house in Qudsaya, a town close to Damascus. Hala mentioned:

*The neighborhood was mostly Alawite and pro-government. They knew that I was an activist and a political detainee. They threatened my family with kidnapping me. This had already happened many times in that town. There were civil militias (Ligan Sha'abiah in Arabic) that kidnaped pro-revolution people, most kidnaped people were women and girls who would be held, tortured, and maybe raped in civilian prisons. Many of these prisons are the kidnappers' houses.*

Because of these threatening circumstances and fearing a new arrest, Hala decided to flee Syria. She escaped through the Lebanese border, and from Beirut she flew to Amman. At the end of my interview with Hala, I asked her what helped her to stay brave and strong. She answered, “I have hope that I will go back to Syria and that our cause will win.”

Hala's strategy to survive the Syrian war and to cope with everyday life in her refugee destination was to continue her activism by volunteering with different humanitarian activist organisations in Jordan and, at the same time, she was looking for a job. When I interviewed Hala, she had recently arrived in Jordan, and she expressed her interest in wanting to be interviewed for my research. While she was telling me her story, Hala mentioned that no one, not even her mother, knows about various details in

her story. Hala's effort to share her story underlines her endeavour to survive passivity and empower herself. Such an endeavour was strengthened by Hala's background as an educated young Damascene woman from an upper middle class family. One should note that Hala had completed her higher education in Damascus; however, due to her political activism she was denied her degree certificate or transcript when she asked for them before leaving Syria. Therefore, her efforts to find a job in Jordan were restricted by both Jordanian strict employment regulations of Syrians and the Syrian regime's "revenge" tactic of depriving opposing activists from their education certificates.

## Maha's Story

Maha (40) is from a village in Dara'a Governorate. She is a mother of seven children (3-16), four boys and three girls. Maha got married early in her life and has no experience in the public sphere. Her life centered on serving her family in the private sphere. Maha's husband was an English language teacher in a local governmental school. He provided the only family income, which was 20,000 Syrian Pounds per month (around \$400). Maha and her husband had no political opinions supporting the revolution whatsoever. In fact, they preferred the safety under Syrian regime rule to the chaos after the revolution. However, these previous pro-regime sentiments did not protect their children and them from being victims of the Syrian regime's hostility. On February 16, 2013, Maha escaped from Dara'a with her seven children. On that day, one of the fragmentation bombs hit their village, and a piece of metal that dropped from the sky fell next to her son while he was in the kitchen. For Maha and her husband, this incident was the final signal from a series of signs that seemed to indicate that Maha and the children should leave as soon as possible. Before that and for many months, Maha's children had suffered psychologically from the armed conflict that lasted until the time when I interviewed Maha during June 2013. The psychological scars of war on Maha's children had been manifested in different forms. For example, one of her sons had sudden bouts of crying and screaming in the middle of the night, and one of her daughters had a reaction to any loud noise that reminded her of bombing sounds and caused her to run and hide her head under several layers of sheets and pillows or crawl under tables and begin crying loudly. When she and the children arrived in Jordan, Maha's

suffering through economic and food insecurity began. The humanitarian aid was not only far from enough for Maha's family to survive on. But, also Maha complained that the UN food aid was generally "rotten." This situation severely affected Maha's and her children's physical and psychological health. The food aid included canned foods, bulgur, rice, and lentils. There were no fruits, vegetables, eggs, or meat. This diet caused Maha's children to have constant bouts of diarrhea and vomiting. Both Maha and her children had Anemia and severe loss of weight. In four months, Maha's weight dropped from 134 pounds (60 kg) to 90 pounds (40 kg). To combat malnutrition, Maha, as did many other women in the Za'atri camp, developed a strategy of surviving by selling food aid at low prices in the Za'atri market<sup>21</sup> and instead buying "edible items." Maha complained about the corruption of the street leader<sup>22</sup>. in the section of the camp where she lived. She revealed that her street leader did not distribute the non-food aid on her street, such as caravans and cleaning supplies, which generally came through individual and non-UN donors. Instead he sold these for money. Maha said that she could not buy a caravan from him because she did not have enough money. However, she bought soap from him several times because her family was so much in need of materials that would keep them clean.

Maha refused charity as a solution for her situation<sup>23</sup>. She said "I want to work and make my living honestly. I do not beg. I want to eat bread by the sweat of my brow." Maha confirmed: "I wish to die instead of being humiliated." Thus, she went to Nour Al-Hussain center asking for a job cleaning public rest rooms. The manger agreed to Maha's request after she listened to her story. Maha signed a contract to work for a monthly salary of 150 JD (around \$210). However, her contract was ripped up when another manger came and hired a woman he knew.

Maha's husband did not accompany them at the beginning because he wanted to keep his income as a teacher inside Syria. However, after he knew about their hardship and misery at the Za'atri camp, Maha's husband wanted to join his wife and children. He left Syria and reached the Jordanian border. However, he could not pass the border because single men are not allowed to enter the Za'atri camp. Maha's husband confirmed with the Jordanian officials that his family was inside Za'atri camp, but they did not sympathise with his case. For three days, Maha waited in front

of the Za'atri camp manager's office until she could meet him. She told the camp manager her husband's story, and later she knew that for her husband to pass the border, he needed to pay 200 JD (around \$282). Maha and her husband could not afford such an amount. Nevertheless, Maha was still hoping that her husband who she occasionally communicated with via mobile phone would join her soon. At the same time, she hoped that the products of an embroidery workshop that she joined might be sold in the future and that would bring her some income.

Maha's strategy to survive the Syrian War and to cope with everyday life in her refugee destination was twofold: to sell her food aid and instead buy what she needed and also to register in embroidery training program at an international organization in the Za'atari camp. As an uneducated mother from a poor rural region who suddenly became a displaced female head of a household, Maha went into severe depression and psychological distress that was reflected in her becoming increasingly violent to her children. Thus, she expressed that spending her free time in a productive way at the embroidery training workshop and talking to a Syrian psychological counselor at the organization made her forget her troubles.

Maha's story highlights the daily suffering of female heads of households inside the Za'atari refugee camp, and the importance of providing cash assistance for them, in the short term, and professional training, in the long term, to achieve their economic empowerment and independence. Additionally, Maha's story calls attention to the obstacles for family reunions when an individual adult Syrian male needs to cross the borders into the Za'atari camp.

## Conclusion

Drawing on a transnational feminist perspective, I have argued in this paper that, in contrast to the dominant representations of global and social media, there is no singular category that fits all "Syrian refugee women." Based on my fieldwork in Jordan during the summer of 2013 that included thirty three in-depth interviews and approximately 100 hours of participant observation in addition to discourse analysis of global and social media, I have analyzed representative examples of global and social media dominant representations. To challenge such representations, I narrated and analyzed six stories

of Syrian refugee women who represent different marginalized groups based on the intersection of their class, age, education, family status, and place of origin.

Thus, stories similar to the examples of Maha, Sima, Mona, Rim, Hala, and Karima are invisible in global and social media representations. The stories of Maha, Sima, Mona, Rim, Hala, and Karima show how, through the process of becoming refugees, Syrian women have heterogeneous experiences. Such experiences refute the dominant global and social media representations that minimized the stories of Syrian women to not only passive victims of war but also subjects of forced marriage in exchange for money by their families. While all these women faced forms of structural violence by the Syrian regime, the intersectional relations of their class, age, education, family status, and place of origin made their experiences significantly different.

Each one – Maha, Sima, Mona, Rim, Hala, and Karima – finds her own way to survive the Syrian War and to cope with everyday life in her refugee destination. Women like Rim and Hala, who are both educated, young, and from upper/middle class families, find a purpose in continuing activism in Jordan to help bring justice and positive change to the lives of refugee women. Women like Karima, who is a mother, uneducated and from a lower class family, find a purpose in protecting their children and securing the best future that they can afford based on their circumstances. In Karima's case, this means escaping Syria as well as the Jordanian refugee camp and, in Amman, sending her children again to school. The individual experiences of each one – Maha, Sima, Mona, Rim, Hala, and Karima – tell us multiple aspects about the main challenges that Syrian refugee women undergo and highlight women's historical and political agency in coping with these challenges.

The dominant representations of Syrian refugee women invisibilise the political and economic relational issues as well as structural inequalities that impacted the ways Syrian women experience the process of becoming a refugee. The lives of Syrian refugee women are impacted by systems of power and privilege that make their voices and stories largely marginalized both in media and reality. In the media, representations of Syrian refugee women are limited to only victims of forms of oppression by their "backward men" with no visibility of forms of exploitation that blame, for example, policies of

international organizations and corruption as was highlighted in Maha's story. Syrian refugee women's political and historical agency is manifested in different forms of resisting political and social injustice in both Syria and Jordan. However, there are systems of privilege and power that silence and marginalize some women's voices more than others. For example, women such as Rim and Hala who have education and class privileges have more visibility in comparison to women such as Maha and Karima who lack such privileges. Additionally, women such as Sima are – because of their rural origin, age, and lack of proper education – marginalized among Syrian mainstream activist organizations in comparison with young Damascene women such as Rim and Hala. This paper highlights the ways in which online media representations robbed Syrian refugee women of their agency and invisibilized the complexity and variety of such stories of struggling for freedom, suffering from violence and war, and resisting inequality and injustice.

By Katty Alhayek

The paper “Untold Stories of Syrian Women Surviving War” is a part of a broader study based on Ms. Alhayek fieldwork during the summer of 2013 in Jordan, where she conducted ethnographic research as well as thirty-three in-depth interviews with Syrian refugee women and activists.

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A Syrian woman displaced by her country's civil war walks with her child on Nov. 9, 2013 in Beirut, Lebanon. (Photo Credit: Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

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1. This camp is the first refugee camp for Syrians in Jordan. A family called Al-Bashabsha donated buildings they own for Syrian refugees. With the increasing flow of Syrian refugees, the UN took over operation of the small camp. Then, the UN established the Za'atari camp to accommodate the continuing influx.

2. This is a practice that the regime soldiers force people to do to humiliate them.

3. Ramadan: is the holy month for Muslims where they believe the Quran was revealed. Muslims fast during Ramadan days from dawn to sunset. According to the Islamic calendar, which is a lunar calendar, Ramadan is the 9th month. In 2012 when Karima was at Set Zaynab, Ramadan occurred between July 20 - August 18.

4. Khan Alshe: is a historically Palestinian refugee camp.

5. Addounia TV is a private television station that is famous for promoting the Syrian regime's propaganda. I believe the role of Addounia TV in the Syrian conflict is similar, to some extent, to the role of RTL Radio in the Rwanda Genocide. Thus, when Karima mentioned that her daughter was watching Addounia. My reaction was: "Really?". Karima said that she did not mind, because she loves her daughter to watch and do the things that make her relaxed and happy after all the suffering that they went through.

6. "Sabaia": is a popular Syrian TV series that was produced before the start of the Syrian conflict. It is similar to the American HBO series "Girls" and even the translation of "Sabaia" from Arabic to English would mean girls.

7. These spontaneous reactions reflect the fear from the media censorship of the regime who consider TV channels such as Al-jazeera and Al-arabiya conspiracy tools against Syria's security.

8. Molham Volunteering Team: is an informal activist organisation of young Syrian volunteers who fled Syria after the Uprising and now work with Syrian refugees in Jordan, Turkey and inside Syria.

9. The reason for Karima's lying is the fear that if Lieutenant Samer knew that Karima's husband is dead so he will think that he was a rebel and that will endanger her family.

10. During my interview with Karima, she did not cry, with one exception, when she told her story about Samer. This reflects the humiliating effects that have stayed deep in her heart. Karima generally tried to sound strong while I interviewed her, especially because two members of Molham Volunteering Team accompanied me during the interview, and they tried to maintain a friendly environment that kept Karima comfortable.

11. Please see Mona's story in the following section.

12. Although Mona accused the regimes' agents inside the camp of stealing the tents, this idea was based more on ideological

beliefs than facts.

13. Akilah Hospital is a Jordanian private hospital that provides free medical services for Syrian refugees based on donations from private businessmen.

14. Al-Zarqa Al-jadidah (New Zarqa): is one of the new suburbs of Zarqa city, which is located 25 km northeast of Amman.

15. Mona was afraid that food or drink would be drugged.

16. A foster child by breastfeeding (Radaa'ah in Arabic) is the only allowed form of an adoption relationship under Islamic Sharia'a law. It is not necessary that the parents of the foster child by breastfeeding are dead. In fact, when any woman has breastfed any child under the age of two years five times, this child is considered her child. However, this child would not usually live with the breastfeeding mother. Thus, this is an adoptive relationship and not a literal adoption. But, under Islamic Sharia'a law this situation affects legal issues such as marriage. For example, Sima's birth son is considered a brother to Sima's breastfeeding daughter and they cannot get married.

17. The systematic torture by the Syrian regime against detainees is gaining international media visibility especially after the report that the CNN exclusively published at the beginning of 2014. The report showed thousands of photographs which were leaked by a Syrian government defector. The photographs document the killing and torture of detainees in Syrian regime prisons (Krever and Elwazer, 2014).

18. A fake number (Khat Madrob in Arabic): is an appellation that Syrian activists use to refer to a phone that they operate through a SIM card phone that they take from a dead security agent or any equivalent person whose SIM card would not be monitored by the regime forces.

19. The Syrian regime is known for using this technique of torture in which the regime agents put a prisoner in a very tiny, dirty single cell where there is no sunlight. The tiny space of the cell allows the prisoner to just sit in a squatting position.

20. In the middle of my interview with Hala, I noticed her fingernails. She realised that I had seen her fingernails when she explained to me what happened. She also showed me other effects of torture on her body.

21. Za'atri market: some refugees (who have money and connections) established market-like structures on the camp's main street where they sell goods like vegetables, meat, clothes, and cleaning equipment, among other things. Many families go to the market shops' owners to sell their food aid and, in exchange, buy goods that they need.

22 The street leaders were men who were chosen by international organisations inside Za'atari to be in charge of each street of the camp. The mission of these leaders would be to help organisations to distribute daily food aid and materials such as clothing, tents, caravans, and cleaning supplies.

23 When Maha told me about her situation, I wanted to connect her to some humanitarian activist groups that I knew in Jordan but she refused and said that what she needs is to work not to depend on charity.