# Syrian refugee men in 'double waithood': Ethnographic perspectives on labour and marriage in Jordan's border towns

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the socio-economic integration and marriage prospects of young Syrian refugee men in in Jordan. Linguistic, cultural and religious similarities with Syrian culture in Jordanian border towns such as Ramtha and Irbid hold the promise of social inclusion and offer emotional comfort. Yet, this familiarity is combined with experiences of social alienation and labour exploitation. Based on qualitative research and ethnography, I propose the notion of 'double waithood' to capture the two main socio-economic axes that structure opportunities and the activities young men engage in. Apart from the time spent waiting for regulated residency status, young men wait to fulfil the economic requirements that enable them to marry and have a family of their own. While waiting for certainty, many are driven to informal and underage labour out to help provide for their families. At the same time, migration as a rite of passage can enable young adolescents to transition to adulthood earlier, as many aspire to fulfil the criteria of the hegemonic figure of the economically self-sufficient male refugee.



**Keywords:** Syrian refugees; Jordan; hegemonic masculinity; informal labour; waithood; ethnography


## Introduction

This paper discusses mechanisms of socio-economic integration, work regimes and marriage prospects that exist among young Syrian refugee men living in Jordan. It examines young men's lives through the lens of 'double waithood', a notion I propose in order to capture the two main structural socio-economic axes of waiting that largely shape individual opportunities. This notion builds on waithood for marriage, introduced by Diane Singerman (2008, 2011) as a condition characterizing many young men in the Middle East, and on 'protracted uncertainty' under circumstances of protracted displacement (Horst and Grabska 2015). Refugee men are simultaneously waiting for stable work and more resources that allow them to marry and have a family of their own, and for a more stable residency status in their current host society or through resettlement. Rather than understanding double waithood as a condition inducing passivity (Brun 2015), this article discusses the variety of ways in which individuals engage with their host community, seek employment, provide for their families and plan the future. I show how temporality (double waithood) intersects with migration to new places and argue that particular spatial characteristics (such as those of border towns) produce different life experiences for male refugees in various ways.

This research is based on ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative research conducted between January 2018 and December 2019. Through its focus on Syrian refugees' plight in neighbouring host countries, the paper recognizes the importance of non-Western perspectives on conditions of migration

and social inclusion (Bank and Fröhlich 2018, 10). My interlocutors reside across the Syrian border in Jordan and often hope to be resettled in a third country, return to Syria or stay in Jordan or another neighbouring country. Refugees and migrants in the Middle East have since long sought employment across national boundaries and often served as cheap labour. Jordan is particularly known in the region as a 'refugee haven' and an important transitory stop in migration within and out of the region'(Chatelard 2010; El-Abed 2014). Border towns in Syria, Jordan and Turkey have appealed to refugees because of cultural and linguistic familiarity, existing economic and trade networks and a culture of Arab hospitality (Thorleifsson 2016). This article engages with less-studied dimensions of border towns by foregrounding refugees' experiences of hospitality's limitations. It demonstrates the socio-economic consequences of the ambiguous attitude of the local population that refugees encounter when they enter the labour market. Local receiving communities show goodwill while also engaging in the exploitation of refugees' vulnerability.

The young men interviewed were virtually all involved in informal employment, which they often started as minors. For many, this meant dropping out of school. Others succeeded in combining education with work and providing for their family, embodying the figure of an ideal and successful, 'economically self-sufficient refugee' (Lenner and Turner 2019). The imagery of ideal (refugee) men reflects the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' understood as the 'currently most honoured way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). I argue in this paper that the humanitarian and economic model of the self-sufficient male refugee easily combines with existing cultural imageries of masculinity, i.e. men as family providers. This results in a powerful understanding of ideal masculinity for male refugees, in which they are family providers and successful navigators of new spaces in terms of education and work. Dominant masculinities in the Middle East are largely characterized by employment, job status, social mobility and socio-economic class (Inhorn 2012; Ghannam 2013). For instance, Syrian refugees in the Netherlands have been shown to 'construct masculinities predominantly in relation to labour market access, paid work and perceived social status' (Huizinga and van Hoven 2021, 1151), similarly to Syrian refugees in Egypt (Suerbaum 2018). More generally, the significance of paid work and breadwinning for men's understanding of manhood has been widely recognized as one crucial form of hegemonic masculinity across various geographical contexts (Donaldson and Howson 2009). This form, however, has been challenged by masculinities emerging in contexts of social and technological changes (Inhorn 2012), 'post-crisis realities' (McLean 2021), and changing geographies of masculinity through mobility and migration (Donaldson et al. 2009; Wojnicka and Pustułka 2017)

The first part of this paper describes the political and economic context of Syrian refugees' access to the Jordanian labour market and outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework and methodology. The second part presents an ethnographic account of young Syrian men residing mainly in the border towns of Irbid and Ramtha. The first section of findings proposes the term 'double waithood' to capture the condition of Syrian refugee men waiting to obtain legal status and waiting for marriage. Second, life in Jordan's border towns is characterized as inherently ambiguous. The spatial proximity and linguistic, cultural and social commonalities offer emotional support but coexist with forms of social alienation, differential economic treatment and outright labour exploitation. The third section of findings discusses the gendered implications of young migrants' entry to the (informal) labour market. Some fulfil the criteria of ideal, economically self-sufficient refugee men while doing the impossible: pursuing education combined with full-time work in order to provide for their families.

**Socio-economic background: Syrian refugees' access to the Jordanian labour market**

Unlike Lebanon, Jordan did not welcome an increase in its low-wage foreign labour supply in the first years of the Syrian refugee crisis. Jordan's unemployment rate had been high and sharply increased since the start of the Syria crisis, from 11.4 per cent in early 2012 to 23.9 per cent in 2020 (Lenner and

Turner 2019, 83; Trading Economics 2020). The country's low-skilled unemployment level was at 30 per cent before the Syrian conflict (Chatelard 2010).

Foreign and low-wage labour in Jordan is highly gendered and differentiated according to national background. Female foreign labourers from mainly Southeast Asia are primarily domestic workers and take care of children and the elderly. Male foreign low-wage workers have traditionally been recruited to reduce production costs in 'agriculture, construction, the hotel business, and the new Qualified Industrial Zones' (Chatelard 2010, 8). Syrian refugees who managed to find (informal) employment have mainly replaced former foreign labour migrants in the same sectors (ILO and Fafo 2015). Non-Arab foreign labour has always been very strictly controlled and regulated through a sponsorship system tied to employers, effectively preventing workers' long-term social integration. Arab labour, on the other hand, has traditionally been more flexibly regulated due to pan-Arab ideological and political-economic regional alliances. Over the last decades, however, Arab migrant labour – mainly recently arrived Palestinians and Iraqis – has become more regulated and selective, erecting barriers to their social integration as well (Chatelard 2010).

Only about 10 to 15 per cent of the 660,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan live in camps. The remaining individuals are self-settled in urban contexts, mainly in the northern towns of Irbid, Mafraq, Ramtha and Zarqa and in the capital Amman. This means that an overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees, about 90 per cent, has access to the informal labour market. Syrians' formal employment opportunities were greatly modified by the political commitment known as the 'Jordan Compact', which aims to integrate Syrians into specific sectors of the Jordanian labour market (Lenner and Turner 2019). This agreement was a result of the London donor conference for Syria and the region in February 2016. The Compact has been celebrated as a policy 'paradigm shift' through its development-oriented approach to a major refugee crisis. It provides a blueprint for turning Syrian refugees into self-sufficient workers by integrating them into existing economic production zones that are separated from the larger labour market, the so-called Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which benefit from US and EU tariff advantages. This 'zonal economy' is meant to offer 'a temporary form of socio-economic integration' to Syrians and at the same time boost Jordan's export-oriented manufacturing (Lenner and Turner 2019, 76). While the Compact initially fell short of delivering on its ambitious promises, the scheme became more successful after further relaxation of trade regulations by the EU in 2018 (Al Nawas 2020).

Although Syrians' options for formal employment have indeed increased, the great majority of refugees remains employed in the informal sector. During the first years of the Syrian refugee crisis, underage Syrians barely participated in the labour force, but their numbers have increased steadily, according to NGO Terre des Hommes (Terre des Hommes 2016). Some suggested reasons for this rise include refugees having gradually depleted all previous savings or sold all valuable assets and adult Syrian refugees' difficulty obtaining work permits (especially until 2018). Furthermore, children are less likely to face prosecution for illegal work than adults, and girls are less likely to be targeted by police than boys (Terre des Hommes 2016, 20). Syrian refugee children have been found to work from the age of 6 onwards, with an overwhelming majority being boys (Terre des Hommes 2016, 21).

Surveys reveal that underage Syrian workers often engage in 'cleaning work, selling in shops or in the streets, work in restaurants, collecting trash in the street, work on construction sites, loading/carrying materials, as well as work as a mechanic or carpenter (…) both inside and outside the camps' (Terre des Hommes 2016, 21). Children earn on average 3 to 5 Jordanian dinars (JD) per day (Terre des Hommes 2016, 23), which by 2019 had increased to 5 to 8 JD a day, according to my interlocutors.

## Theoretical and conceptual framework

### *Waiting and 'double waithood'*

A first key conceptual underpinning of this article is the notion of waiting and what I call the condition of 'double waithood'. Ethnographer and political scientist Diane Singerman (2008, 6) first theorized the term 'waithood' to indicate the period during which youth in the Middle East 'negotiate their prolonged adolescence and remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry'. She coined the term waithood to capture the liminal social status that exists between adolescence and adulthood, leading to what is considered delayed marriage and often material or financial dependence of youth on their families (ibid. 8). The concept of waithood before marriage has been used to denote a widespread social phenomenon in the Middle East and other regions across the globe (Singerman 2011, 2008; Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020; Dhillon and Yousef 2011). The young men in this study similarly struggle to secure a livelihood and wait to collect the necessary resources to be able to marry and build a home of their own. This mode of waiting, however, is complemented by their refugee status, as they wait for secure residency rights in Jordan or elsewhere or for the possibility to return to Syria.

The second mode of waiting as used in this analysis refers to waiting under conditions of protracted displacement and 'protracted uncertainty' (Horst and Grabska 2015). Horst and Grabska argue that uncertainty is a central component of the lives of displaced people. They state that 'coming to terms with uncertainty, then, is often (…) about coping through hope, waiting, negotiating, and navigating' (Horst and Grabska 2015, 5). I see 'waiting' for the young men in this study as being highly determined by their overall condition of 'protracted uncertainty' and its related lack of knowledge, incomplete information and exposure to rumours by other refugees. In these circumstances, the radical uncertainty experienced in war and conflict has decreased and been transformed into a state of short-term expectations in which everyday, routine activities are possible, blended with a higher degree of uncertainty concerning long-term prospects (ibid. 4-8). The Syrian young men in this study are waiting for news from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) about resettlement, from the Jordanian state about potential changes to their residency status or from Syria about a possible return. In the meantime, they engage in everyday activities, including work.

This 'double waithood' – for resources to marry and for more information and knowledge about future living prospects while taking up temporary jobs – includes the two main socio-economic axes around which Syrian refugees' waiting is constructed, as I will argue in this article. Both types of waithood are structural and embedded within larger international, unequal power relations that are shaped by dominant political and socio-economic forces (Hage 2009). While these are general factors that shape opportunities, individuals vary in how they decide to spend time and navigate new spaces. Some perceive waiting as a form of 'involuntary immobility' and could therefore be considered 'involuntary non-migrants' (Carling 2002). Others' aspirations to migrate to a third country are influenced more strongly by the local socio-economic context and the extent to which they are able to integrate into and participate in their new host societies. Anthropologist Daniel Mains, for instance, argues that long-term unemployment in Ethiopia, the feeling of halted progress in life and the abundance of empty time causes feelings of despair among its youth, which makes them long for migration as a spatial solution to this temporal problem (Mains 2011). This article similarly illustrates the crucial relevance of ethnography in understanding the context of potential migration aspirations (Carling and Schewel 2018).

### *Border towns and Arab hospitality*

This paper focuses on young Syrian refugee men residing in the Jordanian border towns of Irbid and Ramtha. Border towns have been defined as spaces in which different material and symbolic frontiers intersect and impact social relations and the availability of economic resources (Caponio, Scholten, and Zapata-Barrero 2018, 288). They are marked by a high level of diversity in nationalities and legal statuses. Southern cities of geopolitical importance, such as Istanbul or Tijuana, are characterized by a strong repression of so-called illegal transit migration to Europe and the US and, at the same time, by a local urban policy of neglect, leading to more spatial segregation and impoverishment (Marconi 2018). Similarly, the border areas between Lebanon and Syria have historically been characterized by a 'policy of marginalisation and state abandonment', to the detriment of local inhabitants (Mouawad 2018, 2). These border areas are typically disconnected from the economic centre, are dependent on foreign aid and engage in illicit economic activities such as smuggling (ibid.). Key concerns in the border town literature are therefore multiple levels of governance, military presence and (il)legal economic activity and human mobility. Less-studied aspects of migration in and to Southern border towns are anthropological questions of cultural familiarity, local integration and the role of (informal) employment.

Overall commonalities among Arab states are reflected in the historical political discourses of pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism, which have translated into a political regime of hospitality and guesthood. In this light, foreign Arab nationals are seen 'as Arab brethren to whom the same type of rights as those accorded to nationals should be granted, with the exception of nationality' (Chatelard, El-Abed, and Washington 2009, 7). Concretely, for Jordan this means that Arab nationals can enter without a visa but do not automatically receive residency or access to the labour market (Chatelard, El-Abed, and Washington 2009, 9–10). Within the hospitality regime, Syrians are considered 'guests' or visitors who are at the same time internationally recognized as refugees and who are managed by UNHCR (Mason 2011). Critical research, however, has indicated the limits and political uses of hospitality discourse in the region (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019). In practice, unconditional hospitality as it is present in cultural registers of Bedouin, Islamic and Arab societies is differentiated from conditional hospitality as managed by the state of Jordan (El-Abed 2014). Syrian refugees in Lebanon experienced both exploitation and solidarity from the local population (Thorleifson 2016), and a hospitality discourse does not protect Syrian refugees in Egypt from experiencing racism and exclusion (Suerbaum 2018). In Turkey, the delicate balance between different ethnic and sunni/allevi communities living in border towns was disrupted by the inflow of Syrian sunni refugees and led to local tensions (Kirişci 2014).

### *Refugee men, gender and masculinity*

A third conceptual underpinning of this analysis builds on the notion of hegemonic masculinity, understood as the 'currently most honoured way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832), in the context of Syrian refugee men. I use this concept not so much to refer to the ideological dominance of men over women or to differences between masculinities but rather to discuss the normative and ideal figure of the male refugee man as encountered in the field. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily reflect the majority or any of the actual lives of men, but does 'express widespread ideas, fantasies and desires' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838). My discussion will engage with widespread, normative ideas of manhood as they circulate locally. The literature has been keener to explore refugee representations than to investigate normative ideals of refugee manhood. In the increasing emphasis on implementing gender equality in humanitarian policy and discourse, refugee men have been represented as 'perpetrators' of (gender) violence, 'powerful gatekeepers' and 'troublemakers' (Olivius 2016, 56). In the context of the Syrian crisis, attention was brought to the tendency of restricting third-country resettlement opportunities for single men because

of ‘security risks’, echoing resettlement countries’ domestic policy concerns of limiting refugee reception (Turner 2017, 30). These representations and assumptions obstruct the view on the various types of vulnerability that Syrian men are exposed to. It is argued that humanitarian workers in Jordan perceive young Syrian men more ‘like a threat, not like a beneficiary’ (Turner 2016). This resulted in aid organizations having less attention for and fewer services aimed at men.

Critical anthropologists and social scientists, however, have pointed to the creation of normative models for refugees. In the context of Syrian refugee men in Jordan, the figure of the ‘entrepreneurial’ refugee (Wagner 2017) and the ideal of the ‘economically self-sufficient’ refugee (Lenner and Turner 2019) have been proposed. Development and humanitarian programmes have been keen on designing projects aimed at creating an ‘entrepreneurial refugee youth’, despite the latter’s initially limited access to the formal labour market (Wagner 2017, 109). Since the London donor conference of 2016, policy makers have treated Syrian refugees as potentially self-sufficient actors, granting them improved access to Jordan’s formal labour market (Lenner and Turner 2019).

Additionally, scholarship on gender and masculinities in the Middle East emphasizes a division of gender roles in which men provide materially for women and their families (e.g. Ghoussoub and Sinclair-Webb 2000; Ghannam 2013; Joseph 1999). In their social role as husbands, men are expected to carry the responsibility of sustaining their families. The frame of Islamic law conceptualizes the marital relationship as a ‘maintenance-obedience relationship’ (Sonneveld 2012). In this formalistic understanding, men are expected to provide the family with income while women are expected to care and nurture. While women have historically often been partners in providing a family income, the idea that men carry the main responsibility continues to powerfully influence young Syrian women and men. In sum, I will argue that dominant understandings of normative refugee masculinity, formulated by local development and humanitarian discourse, converge with dominant cultural understandings of men as family providers.

**Researching young refugee men in Jordan**

This analysis forms part of a larger collaborative anthropological research project on the shifting meanings and contexts of marriage practices among Syrian refugee men and women in Jordan. I was involved as a postdoctoral researcher, and two Jordanian professors from Yarmouk University acted as advisers and researchers. In addition, four Jordanian student research assistants and three Syrian refugees were recruited as co-researchers in the project. My analysis draws on ethnographic research involving two extended families in Amman and on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in Levantine Arabic between March 2018 and December 2019. Ten interviews were conducted by a Jordanian student research assistant and another ten by the author, of which five were attended by both the author and research assistant. We interviewed Syrian men between the ages of 12 and 22 in Irbid and Ramtha, with interviews lasting on average two hours. Only three interviewees were minors at the time (12, 15 and 17 years old). The research group was composed through purposive sampling, based on subjects having recently fled Syria (post-2011 Uprising), living in towns located in the northeast of Jordan (preferably Irbid/Ramtha) and being unmarried.

All interlocutors were recruited through a snowball method. The Jordanian academics and student assistants involved in the project recruited the first participants. The three underage respondents were approached through the parents of one of them and interviewed simultaneously at one family’s home, in the presence and with the participation of the parents of the eldest interviewee. All parents and underage participants consented after being informed about of the nature and purpose of this research and the role of interviewers. The conversational style and unstructured interaction during this meeting more closely resembled an ethnographic interview as participant observation, rather than a typical semi-structured interview (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019, 133–49). All other

respondents were interviewed at locations of their choosing: at their family homes and in coffee shops. In this way, we hoped to exclude circumstantial bias as much as possible.

Semi-structured interviews were complemented by ethnographic fieldwork involving two extended families from the poorer strata of Syrian refugees, who reside in 'the Palestinian camp' of Amman. This location was not a deliberate choice nor a research criterium. I connected with a small NGO working on refugees' mental health and well-being. The organization's founder introduced me to two families they had been serving in Amman. Both families knew each other and lived close to one another in the Palestinian camp. They had moved to this camp, which once hosted Palestinian refugees only, because of the lower rents. My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of regular meetings and engagements with family members' daily lives over the course of more than one year (between March 2018 and May 2019) and occasional visits afterwards until January 2020. Apart from paying home visits, I accompanied my main informants to doctor visits, school administration obligations and shopping and leisure activities in the camp and the city. The ethnographic observations made during my visits that bear on young men's lives and their introduction to the labour market added to the data set and complement the interview findings.

The interviews were structured around a selection of themes: experiences of fleeing, education, work, adulthood, marriage and the difficulties associated with life as a refugee in Jordan. All interviews conducted by me and the Jordanian research assistant were held in Levantine Arabic, transcribed verbatim (in Arabic) and then translated into English by a native speaker of Arabic.

Data analysis followed a qualitative research procedure that started with manual thematic coding of the interview translations and ethnographic notes. I used first-level codes that remained close to emic expressions and respondents' formulations and second-level codes that formed more abstract categories: marriage delay, marriage aspirations, coping with alienation in Jordan, feelings of hospitality in Jordan, first entry to labour market/age of entry, labour exploitation of/discriminatory labour regimes for Syrians, waiting for asylum decisions, waiting for stability in Syria.

My positionality as a white woman with a working-class background entailed both advantages and limitations in terms of acquiring access to respondents and creating rapport. On different levels, my position as an outsider allowed for discussion of otherwise sensitive topics, such as having financial concerns, the inability to find work or marry, shame and anger because of being exploited and taken advantage of by Jordanian employers, and fears of being expelled by the state of Jordan. The research assistant was a 23-year-old male Jordanian student living in Ramtha and studying in Irbid. He was closer to our participants in age, language and places of residence.

The research team agreed that the signing of written consent forms might not be possible in many cases, especially for refugee youth who might feel more vulnerable signing official documents and those refugees who are illiterate. Collectively, a decision was taken to adhere to the ethical protocols developed by the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration by seeking oral rather than written consent. The consent forms were translated into Arabic and signed wherever possible; in other cases, verbal consent was sought. The rules of ensuring anonymity, confidentiality and data protection, the purpose of the research, its funding institutions and the way in which the research would be used were verbally explained to all participants prior to interviews. This explanation was made in lay terms and adjusted when needed in order to be intelligible for all. All participation was sought on a voluntary basis.

## 'Double waithood': Waiting for certainty, waiting to marry

Walid was a 20-year-old inhabitant of Ramtha when we met in a café in Irbid. He has worked full-time in a Jordanian restaurant for the last five years. Some of Walid's relatives and siblings were

arrested, imprisoned and tortured in Syria after the war intensified in 2013. One year later, the family left their home in the city of Dar'a. They crossed the border fence illegally after Jordanian borders closed. One of Walid's brothers got married and lives with his wife and children in their own home in Jordan. Two other brothers sought asylum in Germany after following an informal escape route from Jordan via Turkey to Greece. Walid was in touch with his brothers in Germany daily, and searched for illegal travelling options to follow their example. At the end of our talk, he inquired whether we could help by connecting him to people to take him to Turkey.

Walid's example illustrates the multiple ways of coping with protracted uncertainty by waiting (Horst and Grabska 2015). For more than five years, he has succeeded in creating a daily routine and has been obtaining a structural income to provide for his family. His waiting is by no means characterized by passivity but shows agency by 'carrying on in the present' while at the same time feeling stuck and actively planning the future (Brun 2015). Far from signalling only passivity, waiting is a mode of being. It includes a variety of activities that shows commitment to old or new communities such as planning for the future, negotiating, adjusting and information gathering (e.g. Brun 2015; Lakha 2011). A return to Syria is not an option for Walid and many other young Syrian men in Jordan because of the mandatory military service upon return. Staying longer in Jordan and deciding to 'regain normality' by building a home and a family is another oft-taken path and way of coping with ongoing uncertainty (Van Raemdonck 2021; Brun and Fabos 2015).

Walid too, would like to marry at this stage of his life if only material conditions would allow for it.

> I need to have a house and the necessary financial means to propose to her; and if I have a child in the future, I need to provide food and care. I cannot provide this at the moment because I am taking care of my mother and father. […] My main goal is to travel first but I am unable to. I cannot return to Syria because of military service. I will only stay here when I have no other option. (Walid, age 20)

He believed that marrying and establishing a family in Jordan was impossible because of the high cost of living. Walid navigated border town life in Ramtha successfully by finding a stable job, but his great aspiration was to leave and follow the example of his brothers. In his view, Jordan was holding him back too much and life options are more promising in Europe. Eager to move on, he waited for opportunities for either official resettlement by UNHCR or an unsafe trip to Europe. One form of waiting (for certainty of residence) intersected with another (for marriage), and he felt unable to take any steps in one direction or the other.

Singerman's (2008) original notion of waithood for marriage points to the plight of many young people across the region. However, while young men typically depend on their parents economically and materially during the waiting period (e.g. Singerman 2011), this is often different for Syrian refugees. In Walid's case, as in many others, the roles of provider and receiver of support have been reversed: he took up the role of family caretaker at the age of 15, rather than his parents extending parental support beyond the ideal age of marriage. The financial role reversal during waithood for marriage has important implications for young refugee men's sense of adulthood and masculinity,. The provider-receiver role reversal impacts young men's decision-making concerning marriage and their standing and social perception by the family and neighbourhood. When asked about choosing a partner, he was firm: 'I will choose and [the family] will follow my decision'.

For our interlocutors, the ideal of the husband as provider within a marriage (Sonneveld 2012) continued to play an important role in their considerations of marriage and the selection of a future

spouse. Majd and his brother Zaher met me in their family home's living room on the outskirts of Irbid. White curtains swung wildly back and forth into the room. Majd is a tall, slim 23-year-old who was fortunate enough to graduate from high school in Syria before fleeing and starting work in Jordan. He talked with great precision and determination about his life and future aspirations. He knew 'what kind of girl' he wanted to marry and what he valued in a marital relationship: 'If I were in Syria, I would have married tomorrow'. His brother Zaher, 21, agreed with his views on marriage. They both prefer to marry someone who belongs to the extended family with whom they already have a good connection. It is important for them to avoid any surprises or run the risk of not being able to establish a 'good mutual understanding' with their spouses (*tafahum*) (see also Zbeidy 2020). In their view, choosing a partner within the extended family offers better chances of sharing important values: care, respect and priority for family life.

Similar to Walid's case, financial roles are reversed in Majd and Zaher's cases, as they have become the main providers for the family during their marriage waithood. This relational repositioning can drastically change how family members perceive each other. Schubert (2009) has shown how in the Macedonian countryside, ageing bachelors waiting for marriage greatly outnumbered single female candidates, and mothers waited together with them to marry and restore the supposedly natural order of life. In this context, mothers found the situation of waiting for their sons to marry 'unbearable', making them feel deeply embarrassed and even 'sick' from frustration (Schubert 2009, 10–11). In stark contrast, the families of young waiting Syrian refugee men feel pride when their sons succeed in finding work and providing. Majd and Zaher each work twelve hours a day. During the interview, their aunt, who lives with them, their sister Amal and grandmother stopped by and commented on the conversation but mostly looked at Majd with a fixed, proud smile of approval and admiration in their eyes. Majd had been able to obtain a higher education degree in Jordan while simultaneously working in a full-time job to maintain his family. He was already perceived and socially respected as a responsible adult man who carries family responsibilities.

**Life in border towns: Arab hospitality and socio-economic ambiguities**

Life in Jordan's border towns has been attractive for my interlocutors for the same reasons that partly explain the initial failure of the 2016 Jordan Compact. My interlocutors expressed the necessity and desire to find employment without having to spend a substantial amount of their salaries on public transportation. The revenue made by living and working on-site in a remote industrial area often does not compare to the salaries made through informal work. For Majd, the idea that Ramtha is only 'a ten-minute walk away from Syria' is reassuring and comforting. The familiarity between places on both sides of the border is striking in terms of language, dress, nature and landscape. Cultural similarities offer emotional support: 'Here, our traditions and habits are the same as in Syria. It is the same atmosphere as well.' Moving in a similar environment and landscape reinforces his 'geographic habitus', making him feel at home (Schmalzbauer 2014). . The people he meets through his job regularly confuse him with a Jordanian 'original' inhabitant of Ramtha. He enjoys surprising them with the fact that he is Syrian. The words and dialect are the same. Towns on both sides of the border between Syria and Jordan share strong linguistic, religious, cultural and historical ties, which have been mentioned as factors contributing to an (initially) positive reception of Syrian refugees in Jordan (Achilli 2016, 8; Lokot 2018). Majd believes that this proximity has helped him find a job with Jordanians on the secured parking lot of an international supermarket in Irbid. The legal-political manifestations of Arab brotherhood indeed resonate with broader notions of hospitality extended to fellow Arab nationals on a more everyday level. Hospitality is unmistakably present in the socio-cultural life of many in the region, as it not only connects to the ideology of pan-Arabism but also to Bedouin values and Muslim historical traditions (Barakat 1993; El-Abed 2014).

Majd's brother Zaher similarly refers to Arab hospitality as facilitating their lives and chances of employment. He has a job in a bakery that is run by Syrians but formally owned by Jordanians. This is an informal agreement that gives Syrian refugees the highest degree of liberty in running businesses and is thought by my interlocutors to be more likely to occur in border towns. Zaher left Syria when he turned 18 and was called to serve in the army. He first fled to Lebanon to escape the war violence and seek treatment for the gunshot wound in his hand that he had suffered from for two years without adequate medical care. In this period, he still provided for his mother and younger brother, until his older brother Majd succeeded in reuniting the family in Jordan in 2017. His feelings of belonging, safety and security in Jordan are contrary to his experiences in Lebanon:

> Here [Irbid] is like Syria but in Lebanon it is all Shi'a with a lot of killing and kidnapping and no security. Here is security and it is like Syria and you can go out till 1.00, 2.00, 3.00 a.m. in the morning and it is safe, while in Lebanon you couldn't leave the house after 10.00 p.m., fearing you will not come back home. (Zaher, age 21)

His experience of difference lies in the lack of safety, discriminatory treatment and the presence of Shi'a Islam in Lebanon. For Shi'ite Muslims, 'everything is different', he says, 'the way they pray is different, the way they look is different, their habits and traditions are different'. In comparison, Jordan felt like home and offered basic personal safety. All interlocutors agreed that the border towns of Ramtha and Irbid strongly resemble life in their towns in Syria in terms of street life, the look of the towns, shops and the goods they sell and inhabitants' dress and language. A similar feeling of 'comfort zones' has been noted in certain districts in Istanbul, where some Syrian refugees experience 'cultural intimacy' in terms of 'religious, moral, architectural, urban, and sometimes linguistic similarities originating from the common Ottoman past of the Turks and the Arabs' (Kaya 2016, 4). In sum, border towns have been attractive to Syrian refugees for settlement because of existing family ties, trade and social networks across the borders (Thorleifsson 2016, 1073).

The generally positive experience of familiarity in Jordan is often accompanied by feelings of social alienation, discrimination and maltreatment. Our interlocutors typically did not experience Jordanians as being generous, jovial or chivalrous, which are characteristics they associated with Syrian culture and felt were missing in their host community. 'They don't know chivalry', says Zaher, complaining that 'they don't get up for the elderly on the bus, but rather tell them to take the next bus'. When he is unloading cargo for a shop, he says, others do not offer to help, as they do with fellow Jordanians. Immigrants' attitude of giving negative attributions to the host societies that stigmatize them or treat them differently, has been documented in different contexts including among Syrian refugees in Egypt (Suerbaum 2018, 376–7). Likewise, Jordanians are said to have more liberal gender norms than Syrian villagers. Men hang out on the streets after work. They frequent cafés where they meet and befriend girls. This habit resembles the nightlife in the Syrian city of Dar'a but is not part of the village life in the surroundings of Dar'a they are familiar with. The Jordanian liberal urban youth culture alienates Majd and Zaher and makes them seek out Syrians rather than Jordanians as friends.

Apart from occasional social alienation, virtually all interlocutors experienced socio-economic ambiguities within an overall climate of Arab hospitality. Their negative experiences with discrimination and labour exploitation reveal the power imbalance inherently embedded in the concept of hospitality, especially in relation to migration (Brun 2010). Carpi and Şenoğuz argued that a hospitality discourse in the case of Syrian refugee reception in Turkey and Lebanon contributed to the 'nationalization' of both host societies: while the national self-image as hospitable was enhanced, the same discourse reinforced the Othering of Syrians, hid labour and human capital exploitation, and contributed to differentiating between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' guests (Carpi and Pınar Şenoğuz 2019,

137–8). Investigating Syrians' own experiences with hospitality in this study, my interlocutors confirmed the widespread differential treatment on the labour market. The greatest hurdle for them is finding employment with Jordanian businesses, either informally or formally, and undergoing consequent exploitation and maltreatment. Wages are not equal among employees with different nationalities. It is well known that Syrians in Jordan are on average less educated than Jordanians and work much longer hours for less money (ILO and Fafo 2015; Lenner and Turner 2019). This reality continues to cause frustration, although many refugees have accepted the double standards. In the bakery, Zaher works twelve hours while Jordanians work eight hours and receive higher pay. This differentiation is known by Syrians to be standard practice. Compared to Lebanon, Zaher claims, this type of discrimination is minor. Also, he has heard about far harsher forms of labour exploitation in Jordan. For example, Syrians' payments can be withheld until the amount due has grown very large. When Syrians consequently complain, they are threatened with police visits that could result in expulsion from the country. The circulation of such stories and experiences adds to the uncertainty about life in Jordan that many experience and aggravates the condition of waiting for more secure residency rights (Horst and Grabska 2015).

## 'Having the family's back': Ideal refugee men

It is well known that men often face a loss of recognition and social status after migration, highlighting the importance of (un)employment to their gender identities (Charsley and Wray 2015). This article proceeds to highlight generational difference as an important angle that reveals more nuanced insights, in agreement with Huizinga and van Hoven's (2021) study of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. The young men introduced so far were teenagers when they fled to Jordan. They are now generally considered successful and socially respected because of their ability to find work and provide for their families. In the view of many interlocutors, border town hospitality facilitated their search, although it did not erase the difficulties and discrimination experienced in the labour market. The narratives of these young men are therefore reminiscent of the figure of the 'self-sufficient refugee' as promoted by international agreements such as the Jordan Compact (Lenner and Turner 2019) and the humanitarian and development portrayal of the male refugee as 'entrepreneurial' (Wagner 2017), combined with dominant socio-cultural constructions of men and especially husbands as family providers (e.g. Sonneveld 2012).

The ways in which individual young men relate to such figures of masculinity differ, however. While most were driven to underage, informal labour by sheer economic necessity and despair, some consciously aspired to fulfil certain familial and social expectations. For Zayn, all factors were combined. Zayn arrived in Jordan in 2013 after following a dangerous escape route from war-torn Dar'a at the age of 13. He started working in Ramtha two months later while 'insisting on studying' at the same time. When school hours ended, he left for one of his jobs, 'in supermarkets, carpet stores, local markets, videogames stores and at the gym'. After years of doing double shifts, he managed to obtain his secondary school degree at the age of 19. In his words, this was already 'one year too late', because he 'should have already been at university'.

> My mother keeps on motivating me to study and continue my education. She will not let me give up my education. Yes, my father fell short in that sense, but it is not his fault. It is the environment and the conditions that overcame us. If we were still in Syria and there was no war and the situation was better than it is now, then for sure by now I would have been in university because there I would not have had to work. (Zayn, 19)

Zayn had been extremely motivated and fortunate to achieve the impossible: pursue education and work at the same time – something that most adolescents are unable to do. Walid, for instance, started to work in a shawarma and roasted chicken restaurant in Ramtha at the age of 15. For him, this meant giving up on school and education:

> You work a lot but hardly make enough to pay rent. We work, day and night. It is just enough for rent, food and water. It is very hard. Living costs here are much higher than in Syria. (…) I left school because of that, in order to work and earn a living for myself and my family. (…) If I'd want to finish school, I'd have to leave work and if I leave work then we cannot live because there will be no income. (Walid, 20).

The economic necessity of starting work while underage is strongly expressed when I meet three underage neighbourhood friends who live on the outskirts of Irbid in the Palestinian camp, during a rare night when they are not at work. We are seated outside house of the eldest boy's mother, Umm Husayn, a two-room house for a family of six. Yet, these living conditions are an improvement compared to their previous home, a one-room home within an office building that was shared with 73 other Syrian families. The boys work in three different shops that sell sweets, accessories and flowers but their jobs are very similar: unloading cars, emptying and refilling boxes of products inside the store. Husayn, 17, works on average ten to twelve hours for 5 JD a day, whereas Jordanian nationals earn 20 JD for an eight-hour working day. His mother is saddened when she talks about the heavy loads Syrian minors are forced to carry: 'Yesterday, he carried a box of 50 kg and the whole night I rubbed his back with olive oil because his back is suffering from this work.'

Boys around the age of 12 often start to experiment with work during holidays or other special occasions. During the month of Ramadan and the following days of *Eid*, shop and restaurant owners have an increased need for labour to carry out small tasks such as selling, arranging flowers and promoting and delivering products. Younger kids who are not yet seasoned in informal work get their first experiences on the streets. Their working hours are the longest and the cheapest. Husayn's friend, Basil, has recently turned 12 and is doing occasional weekend and holiday work. During *Eid*, he worked a full day until 4 a.m. and earned 5 JD. He considers dropping out of school next year after summer in order to work full-time. Basil reminds me of the youngest son of a family I visit in the Palestinian camp of Amman, Qais. He dislikes school and homework, despite several attempts of his mother to find a school that he enjoys. His mother has a hard time finding a school that offers decent standards of education. Qais turned 12 in early summer and started to sell sandwiches in his uncle's restaurant during *Eid*, one block down the road in the camp. The money he received that night was not much, but when we walked home together from his uncle's restaurant, for the first time in his life he showed pride in handing the money to his family rather than being the one to receive it.

For these young adolescents, more is at stake than pure economic necessity. In a study among Syrian refugee men in Egypt, anthropologist Suerbaum argues that striving towards economic self-sufficiency is a way of regaining masculinity and refusing the refugee label (Suerbaum 2018, 373). In a similar vein, I argue that the contributions of adolescents like Zayn, Walid, Husayn and Qais' to reaching economic self-sufficiency helps them build a sense of manhood. Unlike their fathers or others, who may face status loss, they are offered an opportunity for a rite of passage by migration (Charsley and Wray 2015, 405–6), allowing them to transition to male adulthood by starting to act as providers. The feeling of being able to contribute and provide for his family was an overwhelming joy for Qais, which seemed to outweigh his school experience. It seemed to bring a sense of increased personal freedom. Taking up this new role indicated the start of a repositioning within the family. It

made him bolder in his comments and his teasing of his sisters. His mother does not agree with his immediate dropping out of school, but she is certain that he will take up more work soon.

## Conclusion

This study examined the realities of young working Syrian refugee men living in border towns in Jordan. Adolescents and young men face high pressures to contribute to the family income and drop out of school. They fear being caught during informal or underage work and being confined to living in refugee camps or being deported to Syria. Border town culture can facilitate refugees' socio-economic integration, according to my interlocutors. The historical, cultural and trade ties connecting the border regions can increase local Jordanian willingness to help. Yet, in these particular spaces that are highly populated by refugees, Syrians are treated differently and have to cope with labour exploitation. This article shows the ambiguities of young Syrians' lived experiences. Accepting to work within discriminatory labour regimes means that they have to cope with physical hardship, but it also brings them more personal freedom in decision-making, especially concerning family matters and the selection of marriage partners.

I have proposed the notion of 'double waithood' to indicate two intersecting forms of waithood that characterize Syrian male refugees. Waithood for resettlement and residency rights parallels the waiting to earn a living and secure the means to marry and build a family (Singerman 2011). While they are keen to move into one or the other direction, 'protracted uncertainty' holds young men back (Horst and Grabska 2015). The notion of double waithood aims to capture these two main socio-economic axes that structure everyday opportunities. Deeply embedded in larger political and economic power inequalities, double waithood limits and characterizes the activities individuals can engage in in order to shape the present and plan the future.

Finally, this article showed how a hegemonic understanding of ideal refugee manhood revolves around the concept of the economically self-sufficient, successful refugee. This articulation of hegemonic masculinity is represented in political-economic spheres (Lenner and Turner 2019), development and humanitarian work (Wagner 2017) and dominant cultural ideas of masculinity (e.g. Ghannam 2013). This analysis showed that sheer economic need to earn a family income often drives young men to informal or underage employment, but equally, the aspiration to fulfil these criteria contributes to young male employment and school drop-outs. Indeed, while older male refugees often face status loss in their new host country, younger generations find new opportunities in migration as a rite of passage and transition to become adult family providers earlier than expected.

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