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Building a new life and (re)making a family.

Young Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands navigating between family and career.

Abstract:

This article presents results of a qualitative analysis based on biographic narratives of three young, well-educated women from Syria. They arrived in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017 in the context of family reunion. The central question is how young Syrian women navigate between two major projects that ask for their agency, being family and work. It is argued that both occupational career development and the building of a family are 'agentic projects' that aim to contribute to the establishment of a new life and to regain continuity. The analyses demonstrate that both projects are closely intertwined. Agency emerges as highly relational and intersecting with the women's position in the life course, timing of life events, ability to adapt career goals to the new situation, and impact of social contexts on family relations.

Key words: refugee family resettlement, life course perspective, agency, displacement and gender, young refugee mothers, biographic narratives.

1. Introduction

This article discusses results of a qualitative analysis based on biographic narratives of three young well-educated women from Syria, who arrived in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017. Due to their specific stage in the life course, important life events and changes regarding their family coincide with main changes and requirements related to the building of a new life as a refugee in a host country. Balancing work and family life is challenging for many young parents and as such young Syrian women do not differ from their Dutch contemporaries. However, their circumstances are fundamentally different. Unlike Dutch young women, they have to get used to a new language, a new - highly complex - society, and they have to reformulate their goals and find new ways to achieve them. Moreover, they are cut off from extended family members and former social networks that used to support them.

The presented case studies are based on data from an ongoing five-year ethnographic research among Syrian (reunited) refugee families. Longitudinal qualitative research can



add to the understanding of subjective perceptions as well as sense-making and decision-making processes of people (Sleijpen et al. 2013; Bek-Pedersen/Montgomery 2006; McMichael et al. 2011). By focusing on the specific position of the women in the life course as well as on family dynamics that occur as a consequence of resettlement, this article aims to gain insights into ways in which young female refugees shape their agency towards (the combination of) a professional career and family responsibilities and how their agency develops.

In the following, I will first provide some background information about asylum policies and Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will explain the main theoretical concepts used in the article and refer to methodology. Then, I will describe the cases through the themes that appear from my analysis. Finally, I will discuss patterns that emerge when comparing the presented cases and will situate these patterns within the theoretical frame of the article.

2. Syrian refugee families in the Dutch context

As in other European countries, especially in the years 2015 and 2016, relatively large numbers of refugees from Syria arrived in the Netherlands. Since 2016, a rising number of them arrived in the context of family reunion (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2019). Family reunion migrants mostly receive their temporary residence permit soon after their arrival. Refugees with a temporary residence permit are not allowed to choose their place of residence. Dutch administration expects all municipalities to house a certain number of status holders and they are centrally allocated to a place of residence (Dagevos et al. 2018: 44; VluchtelingenWerk Nederland n.d.).

Adult refugees with a temporary residence permit have to participate in civic integration courses and to pass exams in language and knowledge about Dutch society and labour market within three years after the starting date of their temporary residence permit. Children of primary school age mostly join a language class, after which they can continue in Dutch elementary education; younger children can join a pre-school. In some municipalities, joining a regular school class and a language class can be combined. Minors between 12 and 18 usually first enter international transitional classes before they move into secondary or vocational education (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland n.d.).

The level of education of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands varies widely. Syrian refugees – both male and female – aged between 25 and 34 are the highest educated. Elderly people more often have lower or no educational qualifications. Young people under the age of 24 are also less likely to have a degree in higher education, as the war and the flight from Syria often interrupted their school careers (Dagevos et al. 2018: 95-107).

Currently, most Syrian refugees have a temporary residence permit for a period of five years. After that, they can apply for a permanent residence permit and then for Dutch nationality. However, they need to have fulfilled the civic integration requirements and their prospects depend on the assessment of the Dutch government concerning the safety situation in Syria at that moment (Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst 2019).

3. Theoretical concepts and methods

Agency and *family* are central concepts in this article and will be elaborated more into detail, preceded by a brief outline of the *life course perspective* that provides the broader frame for this study.

Life course perspective

The life course perspective combines several theoretical concepts that provide guidelines to reach a better understanding of how life courses evolve and are embedded in social relations as well as social, cultural and historical contexts. This involves the understanding of continuity and change in human lives in relation to changing contexts. Elder et al. (2003; 2015) discern five paradigmatic principles that provide guidance for such research.

Human development and aging are lifelong processes. Therefore, a *long-term perspective* is needed to reveal patterns of (dis)continuity in individual life courses. *Time and place* are essential as “individual life course is embedded in and shaped by historical times and places over a lifetime” (Elder et al. 2015: 32). Equally, *timing of life events and transitions* affect people in different ways depending on their position in the life course. Transitions in the life course refer to changes in social roles or responsibilities that are related to age, gender and life stage, such as a marriage, childbirth or a new step in a career. Turning points are events that profoundly change the course of life (Elder et al. 2015: 20). The importance of timing of events, transitions and turning points involves that specific historical circumstances have different consequences and are differently experienced by young people and older people. Gender, as well as socio-economic status and ethnicity, can initiate cumulative processes of positive or negative dynamics in people's lives that further increase differences (Crockett 2002: 5; Elder et al. 2015: 7, 10). Finally, *agency* and *family* (as part of the broader principle of people's *linked lives*) provide crucial insights into ways people actively deal with social change in the context of their relationships with significant others and a specific society (Elder et al. 2003; Elder et al. 2015).

Agency

Agency is a multi-layered concept with several intersecting dimensions. On a psychological level, agency is part of human striving for goals and ideals. As such it relates to intentionality and the pursuit of (culturally defined) ‘projects’ (Ortner 2006: 139-147). The intentional striving and working on projects involve choices and strategies that aim to achieve a ‘good’ – meaningful – life. Ideals about a ‘good life’ and a desired future are shaped by history, personal identity – among which age and gender – and social environment (Buitelaar 2014; Crockett 2002). Consequently, they reflect cultural values, norms and models available in this environment. Building a life in exile requires adaptive strategies: the new situation may necessitate a review and reformulation of ideals, goals and ways to achieve them. Ideals not only fuel personal goals and agency but goal attainment also positively affects self-esteem and future agency. By that it can contribute to an advantageous cumulative cycle of progress (Crockett 2002: 10; Elder et al. 2015: 20-24).

However, personal freedom in the pursuit of goals and projects is far from unrestricted. Several scholars point out that the emphasis in many studies on individual agency and autonomy ignores interdependencies and social structures of power and inequality (Ghorashi et al. 2018; Kağıtçıbaşı 2005; Mahmood 2005; Ortner 2006; Pham 2013). As agents are embedded in social environments and interpersonal relationships, agency is relational and personal ambitions are always negotiated in relation to significant others. Equally, the results of agentic action can be unintended (Crockett 2002: 4; Ortner 2006: 130). Pham (2013) speaks of ‘bonded agency’. She argues that social relations should not just be seen as constraining or enabling agency, but as constituting the very structure and expression of it (Pham 2013: 36). Furthermore, being bonded should not be understood as the opposite of being free. Agency can also be expressed by enduring and negotiating conditions of bondedness and by working on self-fulfilment within that given context (Mahmood 2005: 18; Pham 2013: 31).

Family

Family can be seen as a work of agency because it is shaped and modified by people. That is why Morgan speaks of ‘doing family’ (Morgan 2011: 5, 22-24). To understand the concept of family, it is needed to pay attention to how family members perceive and shape their roles and positions.

Family is embedded in social, cultural and historical contexts. Experiences gained as a family in the past can instruct actions in the present and the future, and absent relatives can motivate family members’ agency. Additionally, family relationships are not static but change and develop over time and due to events and (changing) circumstances (Morgan 2011: 9-12). Ideas about the meaning of family and how to ‘do’ family in a ‘right’ way are shaped by culture and the social environment in which they originated.

Displacement brings radical changes and challenges to the ways family members’ lives are linked. Gender roles and parent-child relations may change (Bushin 2009; Foner/Dreby 2011; Nauck 2005). Different rates and paces of adjustment by parents and children are frequently reported (Foner/Dreby 2011; Gardner 2002; McMichael et al. 2011). Often mastering the new language with more ease and speed, especially older children and youth frequently become *cultural brokers* and translators for their parents and younger siblings. These role reversals imply that parents are more dependent of their children, and (older) children face more responsibilities than before.

In summary: agency is a capacity for action that is created in and enabled by a specific social and relational context. Family is both a work of joint agency of family members and a main social context that creates and enables personal agency of family members. Building a life in exile as a family not only requires reformulation and renegotiation of personal goals and ways to achieve them, but also reshaping of family relations and rebalancing personal and familial projects. Capacity for agency, changing family relations and changing responsibilities interplay with position in the life course, gender and biography of family members.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper are based on an ongoing ethnographic research (e.g. Madden 2010)¹. Twelve households are followed during the five-year period of their temporary residence permit. Data are mainly collected through participant observations, as well as topical and biographical interviews. The families differ considerably in terms of educational level and age of parents and children. The focus in this article is on young women who recently started a family. The fact that they are all well-educated reflects the link between generation and education, as explained in the second section: they belong to the highest educated generation of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Thus, the cases do not represent families in the research with parents and children in a different life stage.

Next to the core families under study, Syrian families from the extended networks of the prime participants in the research form an outer circle. I do not collect data in these families on a regular and systematic base, but generally following their developments allows me to get a broader view and to collect additional information that can shed light on questions that appear among core families. This is demonstrated by the third case in this article, which is based on information from a family in the outer circle.

Biographic stories throw light upon agency, decision-making and meaning-making in the context of displacement. By telling their stories, people provide information about their quest for a new life and the meanings they attach to their experiences. Stories about the past are always coloured by the present and by people's aspirations for the future. Thus, biographic stories reconstruct the past, but also inform about the present and about objectives and strategies towards the future (Bek-Pedersen/Montgomery 2006; Buitelaar 2014; Eastmond 2007).

The analysis of the stories followed different angles of the life course perspective. First, I looked to the stories from the perspective of developmental dynamics of the life course related to timing of life events, transitions and turning points. Second, I looked thematically to the stories from the perspective of the other described guiding principles that link the development of human lives to social change: agency (as expressed in ideals, goals, strategies and choices), linked lives of family members (as expressed in intergenerational relations, gender roles and networks), social context (as expressed in experiences related to Dutch society and policies). Analysis by coding added new (inductive) themes that reflect the perspectives of the interlocutors (Hennink et al. 2011: 40-45). Third, I tried to discover patterns of continuity in the stories by iteratively relating the findings on agency and family in the specific social contexts to timing of life events, transitions and turning points.

4. Three cases of young women

This section presents the biographical narratives of three young Syrian women. The first two cases concern two women in the core of the research and are more detailed. The third

1 Within the scope of this article, the ethnographic embeddedness of the material is less elaborated.

case is of a woman in the 'outer circle'. Her case adds to the understanding of patterns, as it differs in terms of timing of career and family planning as well as dependence caused by migration.

Case 1: Rania²

Rania is 23 years old and was born in a middle class neighborhood in Damascus in a Sunni Muslim family of Palestinian descent. She arrived in the Netherlands in October 2015, at the age of 20. By that time, she had finished secondary school and studied Architecture for two years at Damascus University. Her parents are well-educated and both had jobs in Syria. Rania has a five years older brother and an eight years younger sister.

Looking back on her upbringing, Rania states that education has always been important in her family. Her parents, especially her mother, emphasized that she had to study hard in order to go to university. Among the most important values that her parents instilled in her are self-confidence and self-reliance.

It is that I can take care of myself. Independence. That I am not allowed to say that I cannot do something. You always should try! (laughing, while imitating her parents) 'Why you can't do that? Why other people can do that and you cannot? If someone else can do it, you can do it as well!' That is what I learned from them: go on, don't give up.

The war disrupted Rania's regular life and made her grow up fast. The most shocking event was for her the breaking up of her family: in 2014 her brother received a study visa for the USA and departed. Less than one year later Rania's father left for the US as well. He intended to apply for asylum in order to reunite the family, but his application was refused. On his way back he had to change planes in Amsterdam, but instead he applied for asylum in the Netherlands and stayed there.

Reunion and starting a new life

In the autumn of 2015, Rania arrived in the Netherlands with her mother and her sister Elma. It had been exactly seven months after her father's application for asylum. Her father had just moved from the asylum seekers' centre to an apartment in a provincial town in the middle of the country. After a short stay in an application centre, they moved into the apartment.

Rania describes the first year in the Netherlands as a confusing and most difficult phase³. Everything was new and it took quite a long time until things got started, as for instance language courses. Fortunately, she and her parents spoke some English, so that they were able to communicate with representatives of organizations and the municipality.

2 The life story interview with Rania took place in April 2018 and was mainly in Dutch. Occasionally, she used Arabic, in case of certain words that she found difficult to translate. At the time of the interview, Rania was more than 7 months pregnant. In describing the case I also use references based on other meetings with her and her family.

3 Rania's description reminds of what is called 'liminal phase' in anthropology. In the field of refugee studies Victor Turner's concept of liminality is frequently used (e.g. Ghorashi et al. 2018).

I couldn't do anything here in the first period, I did not know about things, the rules, the schools for Elma... We really needed someone's help. That is why we had a contact person.⁴ We had appointments with her every week or two weeks, at her office. When we received letters and such, we took all the letters with us, we wrote down all our questions, and then we asked her everything and she really helped us.

Among the things that Rania learned from the contact person is that she should be persistent. The contact person explained that she should repeat her questions to public service agencies – by mail or by phone – if an answer took too long. And that is what she did from the start: she did not wait and see, but was proactive in communicating with all sort of organizations.

A couple of months after her arrival in The Netherlands, Rania started her civic integration course. Within a year she passed the language exams on a B2 proficiency level, which is required to start in Dutch higher education.

Changes in family relations

The moving to the Netherlands caused major changes in the family relations, especially in Rania's role. Due to her age and because she learned Dutch rather quickly, she became the family's main broker to Dutch society.

In Syria my parents did not need my help. Absolutely not. It was totally the other way around. We were the ones who asked for their help. They were capable to do and arrange everything. Here it is different and that is very difficult for them.

Besides getting new responsibilities towards her parents, Rania's relation with her sister Elma changed profoundly. Elma was 12 years old upon arrival in the Netherlands and did not easily find her way into Dutch education. Rania became the main contact person for Elma's schools and advises, translates, and thinks along with her parents about what to do concerning Elma.

It is easier for me than for Elma. I finished a complete period in Syria and here I can continue with the next step. That is clearer than Elma's situation. To get integrated into the educational system and learn the language, I think it is the best to have either my age and a diploma of secondary education from Syria, or to be much younger, so that you start early in primary education and have time to grow into it. But Elma is sort of in between. That is really the most difficult.

Life changing events

Rania mentions three positive turning points in her life: her marriage, her studies, and her motherhood.

The lead-up to her marriage started when she was still in Damascus with her mother and sister. Her father incidentally met with a young Palestinian from Damascus, called Anas, in the reception centre for asylum seekers at the airport of Amsterdam. They shared their stories and stayed in touch afterwards. The good contact with Rania's father encour-

4 The contact person was working for the Dutch Council for Refugees (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland), an independent NGO, that looks after the interests of refugees.

aged Anas's interest in his daughter as a marriage candidate.⁵ He asked her father for permission to get into touch with Rania. This resulted in a visit by his parents in Damascus to Rania, her mother and Elma. After her arrival to the Netherlands, Rania and Anas got engaged and met each other frequently before they decided to marry.

Anas entered the Dutch labour market relatively soon. He was accepted in a special program for highly educated refugees in a big company and got a permanent job. In the summer of 2017, almost two years after their engagement, Anas exchanged his apartment in Amsterdam for a bigger apartment in the village where Rania lived. They married in August and subsequently Rania moved from her parents' house to the new apartment.

Less than one month after her marriage Rania started studying Architecture at a university of applied sciences. Moreover, she got pregnant. Although struggling with the language and finding it hard to connect to Dutch students, Rania is highly motivated. Her studies are a crucial part of her plan to work hard in order to be able to start a new life. Both Anas and her parents support her. Anas helps her to prepare for examinations and her mother cooks for her when Rania is busy.

In May 2018 Rania's daughter Lana was born. For Rania and her family Lana's birth is especially joyful because, in Rania's words, "it makes our family bigger again".

Balancing family project and career project

Rania's main challenge now is to combine her studies and the care for Lana. She believed from the start that she can make it, because her parents and Anas help her. After a break of four months, Rania resumed her studies. She obtained enough ECTS points (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) for admission in the second year of the bachelor program and now she does not need to go to class every day anymore. This enables her to care for Lana and study at home two days a week.

She feels that she is doing well and got used to her new life. Anas still helps her with her studies, but this year is easier for her. He also cares for Lana when he is at home. Her mother cares for Lana during the three days that Rania has classes. And her sister, fond of Lana, mostly visits her after school on the days that Rania is at home.

Case 2: Zena⁶

Zena is 27 years old and from a modern middle class Damascene suburb. She is from a Sunni Muslim family and has three younger brothers and a younger sister. Her parents are well-educated and both have a job at a Syrian Ministry. When talking about her childhood, Zena looks happy. She had a joyful childhood with lots of playing outside with her brothers and the children from the neighbourhood.

5 Later on, Anas reflected on this procedure by saying: "Family, and what Rania learned from her parents, is very important. That is our tradition and our culture. My child will learn as well from her grandparents, so (*laughing*) it is very important to choose the right grandpa and grandma!"

6 The life story interview with Zena took place in two parts in September and October 2017 and was mainly in Dutch. Occasionally, she used Arabic. At the moment of the interview, Zena was 6 months pregnant with her second child. The information in this article is also based on other meetings with her and her husband.

After finishing secondary school, Zena studied Business and Finance. Soon after she received her certification, the war started. As a young adult, who just had become a starter at the labour market, she experienced the social and economic consequences of the war first-hand.

After my studies, I was at home without a job. Because of the war, banks could not employ new personnel and some banks even closed. So I stayed at home, looking for work, but I could not find anything. Next, I followed a computer course and finished it with a state examination. But I still couldn't find a job. Then my parents helped me by looking for work at their ministry. Not a paid job, but a traineeship. That worked out and I could do two internships, each of them three months.

During the internship Zena met Kareem, an electrical engineer who worked in the same department. They fell in love and before long Kareem and his family visited Zena's family to ask for her hand. After an engagement of six months, they married and moved in an apartment close to Zena's parents.

After Zena's internship, again she was at home without a job. Kareem still worked at the Ministry but did not earn enough to make ends meet. Moreover, he wanted to leave Syria and find a safe place to live for him and Zena. However, Zena had become pregnant and did not want him to leave during her pregnancy.

In February 2014, Zena gave birth to her daughter Safa. This urged Kareem even more to find a better place to live, as Safa was often ill and health care in Damascus was poor. Kareem left when Safa was four months old. Two and half months later, he arrived in the Netherlands, where he applied for asylum and family reunion. Meanwhile, Zena and Safa stayed with Zena's parents.

This period I do not want to remember. It was difficult, really difficult. It was the first time that I felt so responsible. I was worried about Kareem and about my daughter. When she was ill, what should I do in the night? It helped me that I lived together with my family again. My parents helped me very much.

Reunion and starting a new life

In March 2015, Zena and Safa arrived in the Netherlands after a separation of nine months. Kareem still lived in an asylum seekers' centre (ASC) by that time. The centre was an old holiday resort and they had their own home. This period was characterized by happiness of being together and hope for the future.

After two months in the ASC, they moved to a house in one of the big cities of the Netherlands. It was not an easy start. Kareem and Zena did not know the city yet and did not know people who could help them. The contact person of the municipality only offered help in arranging water, electricity, internet supplies.

We did not know where to go. We went to IKEA, but we only had €3000⁷ and we wanted a sleeping room and a sofa. This money was not enough for even one room! So, the three of us slept on the air mattress for one month (laughs). We did not know how to handle it and we did not know our way around. But basically, we were happy.

7 Refugees receive a loan from the municipality to where they are allocated, at the moment that there is a house available for them. The amount of money that they receive differs between municipalities.

The positive spirit of the first period increased by the arrival of Zena's brother and four siblings of Kareem in the Netherlands. Although living in other parts of the country, they visited each other in weekends and holidays.

Mutual dependence and life changing events

Now that Zena and Kareem had a house, time had come to start language and civic integration courses. They enrolled in courses with different schedules, so that they could alternate the care for Safa. This situation changed as Kareem was encouraged by the municipality to take part in a pilot program for higher educated refugee students at the university of applied sciences. This caused much stress, because the program was too intensive to combine with the care for Safa and with Zena's lessons. Eventually, both of them missed numerous lessons and flunked their exams. Zena had to leave the language school and enrolled in another school that she disliked as lessons were less intensive and more basic. Kareem returned to his former language school.

Safa went to pre-school when she became two and half years old and Zena and Kareem regained their former balance: both followed their courses and shared the care for Safa and the household. Kareem had some job interviews but that did not result in an actual job. A main change occurred as Zena became pregnant. She was aware that a new baby would not bring her closer to a study or work, but Safa was getting older and they strongly desired another child.

By the end of January 2018 Zena gave birth to her daughter Hala. The first weeks after Hala's birth, Zena's sisters in law assisted the family before the couple resumed caring for their daughters together.

Three months after Hala's birth Kareem started a training in entrepreneurial skills, facilitated by the municipality. He worked out a plan for a restaurant, but at the end of the training the municipality declined his plan and forced him to accept any work available on a short term. That is how he became a deliverer of online orders at a big grocery store.

Balancing family project and career project

For Zena Kareem's work involves a big change. Before, he used to bring Safa to school and picked her up at the end of a school day. Now she has to do everything alone and always has to take Hala with her. She decided to postpone her ambitions, as she considers it her responsibility to stay at home at this stage.

I would like to work, of course! In Syria I also wanted to work, I always wanted to work! But my duty now is to stay at home with the children. They are simply too young. I cannot bring Hala to a day care yet. And we also do not have the money for that.

Zena relates her situation to her life stage: she has to build a family and a career at the same time. In the Dutch context, without her parents around, this is very hard.

It is difficult for me that I have to do everything at the same time. I am building a new life and I am building a new family at the same time. In Syria, I would have finished my studies and then I would work, and after that maybe I would become a mother, but I would already have work. Here, I have to pay for a new study, to learn everything about this country, the rules, the language and everything, and then I have to raise my children, build my family, care for... That is very difficult. To do

everything at the same time. Maybe, if my mother had been here, close to me, maybe then I would have gone to school or university, or to work. But it is different here. Maybe when Hala goes to pre-school..., then I can care for myself.

Case 3: Basma

Basma is a young woman in the ‘outer circle’ of the research⁸. She is 30 years old and from a Sunni Muslim family from the city of Aleppo. She holds a PhD and was a starting assistant professor at the university. In 2015 she married Shadi, a fellow PhD student. Eventually Shadi did not finish his PhD but fled the country shortly after the wedding. He arrived in the Netherlands in the summer of 2015. The reception centres for asylum seekers were overcrowded at the time and it took a relatively long time until Shadi received his temporary residence permit and could apply for family reunion. Basma therefore only arrived in the Netherlands in January 2017. Meanwhile, Shadi had been very active. He wanted Basma to find a good situation at her arrival. While still living in an ASC, he contacted universities and companies and succeeded in getting a job at one of the companies.

When Basma arrived Shadi had already acquired a house, had a job and had started a Dutch language course. Therefore, Basma spent much time alone in the house, waiting for a place in a language course. Moreover, in contrast to other family reunion migrants, the municipality did not offer her any programs. She remained out of sight since Shadi had a job and they did not receive social welfare benefits, often a main motive for municipalities to invest in newcomers (Razenberg et al. 2018). Because it took a long time until she could enter a language class, she did not easily meet other people.

When she finally was able to join a language class, she got pregnant. Basma had a difficult pregnancy and her language study stagnated. After the birth of her son Ziad, she fell into a depression. She first thought that it was a postpartum depression but later on realized that it might be caused by her whole situation. She is lonely in the Netherlands, her parents and two sisters are still in Aleppo, her brother is in Turkey. She talks with them several times a day by WhatsApp and sends them videos of little Ziad. During the day, she is mostly alone as Shadi is working. Nevertheless, she lacks time to concentrate on her language skills as Ziad is keeping her busy.

She still dreams of continuing her academic career, but she would need to improve her English considerably; in Syria fluency in English was not a prerequisite in academia. Sometimes she goes for a stroll with Ziad in the baby carriage, but it makes her feel sad that she does not have any goal; she is just walking. She had not realized that it would be so difficult to build up a new life in the Netherlands and that she might need to start all over again. “I never thought that I would get into this position”, she says. She mentions an Arabic expression: “A year for yourself and a year for your family” and adds: “I had many years for myself and now I have to compensate for that”.

⁸ See the section about methodology. The material from Basma’s case is less extensive, as she does not belong to the core families participating in the research. The information presented here is based on field notes of several meetings and informal conversations with her in 2017 and 2018.

5. Findings

Analysis of the stories shows that the women's abilities for agency intersect with several dimensions of the life course perspective as presented in the theoretical frame. I ordered them into three categories: 1) temporal dimensions, which relate to timing of life events and transitions; 2) motivational and strategical dimensions, concerning ideas about the life one would like to live, regarding both family and career; 3) social dimensions, relating to family relations and a wider social context.

The findings are arranged according to the emphasis they show, but due to their strong entanglements there is significant overlap between them.

Timing of events

Rania's story stands out by a high density of key life events since resettlement and simultaneously it sticks out by a quick reestablishment of the progressive trend in her life course. A combination of elements in her story makes the timing of migration in her life course fortunate. First, at arrival in the Netherlands, she was still unmarried. Not having responsibilities for young children yet, she was in a position that enabled her to learn the Dutch language and to complete the civic integration program rather quickly. Second, thanks to the fact that she had finished an important educational stage in Syria, she could enter into the Dutch educational system relatively easy. Third, in Syria she was still a fresh student and had not yet started a job career. In fact, Rania continued what she started in Damascus with a 'delay' of two years in which she set the foundation for the continuation of her career project as well as the start of her family project.

Timing of migration in the life course was less fortunate for Zena and Basma. Both married in Syria and arrived as family reunion migrants, following their husbands. Zena already had a child at arrival in the Netherlands. She and her husband had to coordinate childcare and attending the civic integration courses. During her pregnancy she succeeded to complete the language and civic integration courses, but on a lower level than she aimed for. Zena finished her studies in Syria but did not start a job career yet because of the war. In the Netherlands, she again is unable to work because the municipality forced her husband to work fulltime.

Basma was not a mother yet at arrival in the Netherlands. The period of separation of her husband was relatively long as was the waiting period before she could start her language course. Once started with the course, she was unable to complete it due to her pregnancy. Thus, timing of pregnancy and childbirth was disadvantageous with respect to her civic integration trajectory. Regarding timing of career development, Basma already started a career in Syria. Being ahead of her husband in Syria, in the Netherlands a serious gap between them in terms of career development occurred. Moreover, this gap increased due to her being out of sight of the municipality, her pregnancy and motherhood. Since she had a good position in Syria, the difference with her present situation is large.

Motivations and strategies

All three women aim for a professional career as well as for a family. They show different forms of agency, regarding the reestablishment of a career path. While Rania takes a goal-oriented and systematic approach, both Zena and Basma are still in the process of figuring out how (and if) they can continue with the trajectory they started in Syria. Zena has decided to postpone her career until a moment that it can be combined with her family responsibilities. This choice reminds of what Phạm (2013) describes as bonded agency: Zena made a decision within the given context and decided to endure it for the time being. Basma is still in the stage of her civic integration trajectory, and therefore in the process of meeting the conditions to rebuild a career. Her agency is bonded by her position in the family and her being between stages.

Characteristic in Rania's case are the high values regarding education and (economic) independence that feature throughout her story. She frequently expresses values with which she has grown up and that are connected to strong study and work ethics. So far, these ethics are guiding her and help her to achieve her goals. This suggests a continuation of values that were guiding her prior to the war, and the ability to transmit them to the new context. In addition, formative experiences in the first period after resettlement may have stimulated Rania's agency as well. As an unmarried young adult, she became a broker for her family and very quickly learned how to arrange things in the new situation. This role encouraged her ability to cope independently.

In all cases family planning does not seem to be affected by civic integration courses or ambitions to study or work. The women mentioned several reasons for this: wanting the family to grow again (Rania), not wanting the age difference with an older child to become too big (Zena), having the age to start a family (Basma).

An explanation for the emphasis on the family project at this stage may be found in a combination of life stage of the parents and main motives for migration: safety of the family and the future of children (Bushin 2009; Foner/Dreby 2011). Now that the couples find themselves in a safe country and finally can live the life together that they aimed for, it seems the right moment to get a child. In addition, women are more in control of their family project, while goals related to the career project ask for considerable adaptation and are subject to external influences that are unpredictable and difficult to handle.

In all cases, the newborn children are part of the plan for a desired future. Building a family may be seen as a strategy to regain continuity and recovery of broken (extended) families. The birth of a child in the new country can represent future, positive change, and a confirmation of the connection with the new country.⁹

While a career plan does not seem to temper family planning, having children does affect career planning. Especially when career goals and strategies have not yet been reformulated in view of the new society, as with Zena and Basma, childbirth can provoke challenging questions regarding the reestablishment of a career path.

9 This interpretation is also fed by findings in other families that participate in the research and had a child after resettlement in the Netherlands.

Family relations and social context

The presence or absence of parents and extended family members feature in all stories. Rania faces increased responsibilities towards her parents and sister, but simultaneously their presence offers a source of continuity and facilitates the combining of study and childcare. Moreover, she receives motivational and moral encouragement from her parents that supports her to recreate continuity in her life. In other words, Rania's family and career project include her parents and sister; equally, her family and career projects are part of theirs.

In the cases of Zena and Basma, continuity between the generations is lacking. The broken link with parents and a broader social network complicate the building of a career and increases dependence on their husbands. The women have to tackle several highly demanding projects simultaneously in a context where the possibilities to rely on the assistance of family and friends are limited.

In practice, Dutch policies unintentionally seem to reinforce unequal gender relations by measures that aim at the quick economic independence of refugees and mostly address men (Razenberg et al. 2018). Zena and her husband intended to share the responsibility for their children and to work both. Basma remained unnoticed by the municipality and became isolated due to her husband's successful start. Thus, these policies led to a gendered division of labour that neither the women – nor their husbands – aimed for.

6. Conclusion

This article discussed how three young Syrian women who arrived as family reunion migrants in the Netherlands navigate between two major projects that ask for their agency, being family and career. Due to their specific stage in the life course, important life events and changes regarding their family coincide with main changes and requirements related to the building of a new life as a refugee in a host country. It is argued that both career development and the building of a family are agentic projects that aim to contribute to the establishment of a new life and to regain continuity. However, challenges that the women and their families face in the new social context go with changes in family and gender relations and affect the agency of women.

Arguments arising from the analysis of the biographic stories point to three dimensions that affect agency, either positively or negatively: 1) temporal dimensions, concerning timing of life events and transitions; 2) motivational and strategical dimensions, concerning ideas about the life one aspires to live; 3) social dimensions, relating to family relations and a wider social context.

Timing of career development, family development, and resettlement appears to affect the starting position and agency of women. It was found that a successful career in Syria can cause a significant drop in the Netherlands, especially when the timing of resettlement and childbirth slows down the integration trajectory compared to that of the husband. Alternatively, creating a basis for the career project before the start of the family project can support the combination of a career and a family.

Regarding the motivational and strategical dimensions, goal orientation can support the (re)establishment of a career path and contribute to a progressive cycle. However, adaptation and reformulation of personal career goals appear as difficult. As Dutch society is so different, it takes time to discover whether ideas about the life one would like to live can be pursued and are realistic. Educational and career pathways can benefit when women have taken a leading position from the moment they arrive.

As for the social context, absence of extended family members and social networks are a major hindrance for young Syrian women in the process of (re)establishing a career and a family in a new country at the same time. Conversely, the presence of family, especially parents, can be a vital source of support and contribute to the recovery of a progressive trend in the life course. Furthermore, governmental gender-blind policies may unintentionally increase dependence of young women and may contribute to isolation and pressure on them and their families. Having children in the first years of resettlement is – from the perspectives of the women – not a choice to refrain from a career. Neither do problems in (re)establishing a professional career primarily relate to restrictive views of the women or their husbands on gender roles. In fact, these policies may cause that women are forced to step backwards and end up in a more dependent situation than they came from.

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