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The Resilience of a Syrian Woman and Her Family Through Refugee Entrepreneurship in Jordan

Sophie Alkhaled

17.1 Syrian Refugees in Jordan: A Context of Crisis

As the Arab Spring enters its 8th year, the political and economic outlook remains tumultuous for the people of Syria. Indeed, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) figures in April 2018, there are currently over 5.6 million Syrian refugees who have fled to neighboring countries Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. Syrians have also fled to Europe in large numbers, making approximately 884,461 asylum claims since April 2011. Hundreds of thousands more live in Gulf countries that are not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, and thus are not recorded as refugees. It is also estimated that another 6.3 million people have been internally displaced within Syria.

S. Alkhaled (✉)
Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK
e-mail: s.alkhaled@lancaster.ac.uk

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The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is an Arab country bordered to the north by Syria, and thus, it has received hundreds of thousands of refugees since the crisis in 2011. However, as the strain on national resources was too great, Jordan opted to close its borders to all Syrians in May 2014, leaving 659,063 Syrian refugees living in Jordan today (UNHCR 2018). In an attempt to protect the native population from economic instability and a rise in unemployment, the Ministry of Labor made it almost impossible for refugees to obtain work permits, leaving them tied up with a complex bureaucracy in their attempts to obtain a permit. Today therefore, less than 1% of refugees have access to legal work permits, and it is estimated that over 200,000 Syrians are working illegally and are exploited without any of the legal protection offered by labor laws. Leaving most refugees with very limited options for employment in these countries has naturally increased their dependence on humanitarian assistance for survival, with a corresponding decline in living standards, with around 86% of refugees living outside refugee camps in Jordan and surviving below the poverty line of 3.2 dollars per day.

It has been specifically highlighted in reports by UN Women (2013) and Save the Children (2014) that women have been hit the hardest by these circumstances, leaving them to face gender-based violence, and many widowed women with no "choice" but to force their daughters into child marriage to "protect their honor". On the other hand, it has been reported that women are the sole providers for one in four Syrian refugee families and thus, have resiliently maximized their limited resources and innovatively responded to these harsh conditions by setting up micro, home-based businesses in typically feminized indigenous skills, such as cooking and traditional craftwork (UNHCR 2014).

17.2 Syrian Women as Refugee Entrepreneurs

Whilst media exposure and academic research has proactively analyzed the political and economic developments within the region, little attention has been paid to the gendered implications of this revolutionary process (Al-Ali 2012). It has been argued that an institutional perspective

to researching women's entrepreneurship could provide an integrated lens for appreciating the formal and informal institutions which shape the sociocultural, political and economic entrepreneurial environments in developing and transition countries (Mair and Marti's 2009; Welter and Smallbone 2008). Other studies adopt similar perspectives, focusing on the context of (gender and) entrepreneurship (Welter 2011) in terms of theories of "necessity" and "opportunity" recognition (Galloway et al. 2016) and understanding entrepreneurship as socially constructed and embedded within a place, context and social network which influence entrepreneurial practices and outcomes (Mckeever et al. 2015; Jack and Anderson 2002; Zahra 2007). Whilst a substantial amount of distinct approaches to researching women's entrepreneurship have emerged that embrace the intersectionality and the embeddedness of women entrepreneurs within their context (Mirchindani 1999), the core of theoretical conceptualizations seems to focus on women in developed countries as either nationals who have been "pushed" into entrepreneurship because of the "glass ceiling" in employment (Hughes 2003) or "pulled" through seeking autonomy and self-fulfillment (Orhan and Scott 2001); Alternatively, scholarship has focused on ethnic minorities or migrants facing discrimination and/or cultural conflicts of employment between their traditional homes and western society (Essers and Benschop 2009).

Research on women's entrepreneurship in developing countries, especially those in poverty in rural areas (Mair and Marti 2009), has viewed them as "barefoot" or "bootstrap" entrepreneurs (Imas et al. 2012). Their entrepreneurial experiences have been illustrated as an alleviator of socioeconomic constraints and poverty (Scott et al. 2012) and thus, as a vehicle for women's emancipation (Rindova et al. 2009; Goss et al. 2011) and empowerment, both domestically and within their community (Al-Dajani and Carter 2010; Datta and Gailey 2012; Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013), while—crucially—critiquing the "dark sides" of this phenomenon. However, in the case of a female entrepreneur in exile, it is unclear how they will survive without the support of capital or preexisting networks and socially embedded ties, such as family, friends and close personal contacts, especially in a classic patriarchal context. Therefore, while these arguments clearly describe how the women's entrepreneurial context influences their motivations and practices, research examining refugee

entrepreneurship in a context where work permits, social welfare or international aid are inconsistent is scarce.

As an academic of Syrian and British heritage, whose research focus had been centered on exploring and questioning women's empowerment through entrepreneurship in the context of the Middle East, researching this phenomenon was not a choice, but rather, a necessity—on both a personal and professional level. I have been conducting data collection on fieldtrips to Jordan since 2015 and will continue to do so until current funding expires in 2018. The longitudinal study following women entrepreneurs and their families' endeavors to survive has been challenging, given their precarious state and economic instability. This chapter explores refugee entrepreneurship in Amman, Jordan, through the heroic story of one of these formidable Syrian women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and perseverance against all odds alleviated her family from poverty, in a socio-political and economically restrictive context loaded with heartbreak, pain and a yearning to go home.

17.3 Hanifa's Story (2011– Until 2018)

Haifa is a woman in her early 40s from Homs, Syria. She married her husband when she was in her early 20s and has five children: a 22-year-old son, three teenage daughters and a 9-year-old daughter. Hanifa's husband was a carpenter and held a stable job in Homs. She had completed her college education in graphic design before she married, but did not engage in full time work and focused on the home and her family. She did, however, support the household with extra income by occasionally sewing made-to-order curtains for friends and family.

As the Arab Spring began to ripple across Syria, Hanifa and her family were amongst those filled with the optimism that had gushed down the streets of Homs, believing that democracy would be soon knocking on their doors. However, their hope soon turned into horror, as their district in Homs fell under siege for seven consecutive days. Hanifa and her family were willing to wait it out, until news broke in her neighborhood that the military and militia had been breaking into houses, taking young men and forcing them to join the army. Furthermore, they were

committing unbearable acts on women and young girls, leaving no family safe from terror. Fearing their son would be taken and daughters harmed, they decided to flee Syria and enter Jordan in September 2011. They chose Jordan because they had family members residing there from her husband's side, who offered them support.

Upon arrival, they lived with her brother-in-law and his family for a few weeks. Her husband's brother (who had lived there since the 1980s) used his local networks to get her husband into work, which was neither stable nor sustainable given the institutional constraints imposed by the Jordanian government on work permits for refugees. Being crammed in a tiny apartment with little money pushed Hanifa out of her comfort zone of being a protected housewife. She explains:

> I looked at my family all crammed in one room, my children weren't going to school, my husband couldn't find stable work and suddenly for the first time in my marriage I felt responsible. I had to step up and take responsibility of my family. Not all Syrian housewives feel that but I did. Even though I had never really worked in Homs and did not have the confidence in myself, I felt my God I have to work! I need to feed my family. I cannot just sit and depend on his brother. I need to go out. I need to work.

The first task she gave herself was to find an apartment. Struggling with the change in the gender relations and responsibilities in the family, Hanifa says:

> I went to find an apartment alone! Can you imagine? Alone! My husband worked 8am–6pm for six days a week. He was exhausted. So I started knocking on the neighbours' doors, I went from building to building asking if they had any apartments for rent. Eventually, I found one. Next task was getting furniture. So I started getting lists of charities and going to them to see if they have furniture that I could buy second hand sofas as well as all other stuff a house needs.

Once they had settled in their home, Hanifa decided she wanted to start looking for work. She had studied graphic design in college, but was aware her knowledge was outdated. She decided to look through advertisements and phonebooks of engineering companies, reading last

names of small business owners—hoping to find a Syrian last name, as she believed a Syrian would be most supportive of training her. Some opportunities came through, where she went to business offices and trained on new software, but she realized she would never be able to make money through this route, as no one would employ her without a permit. Therefore, she decided to give up on her quest to train herself as a graphic designer and decided to turn to the local charities for support:

> Whilst my heart wanted me to maximize my degree, my head knew this would not work. So I needed a new work place. Then one day through the mercy of God I was walking down the street after dropping off my daughter at school, and this woman pulled over in her car and she came up to me and asked "are you Syrian?" she was Jordanian, I was shocked she guessed it, I suppose you can tell from the way we Syrians wear our scarves on our heads, so I said "yes", she said "great, I have been looking for Syrian women and today God sent you to me, do you want to work?", I said, "yes", she said "well we are a charity building a network for Syrian women seamstresses to train a our charity. Come to our group and meet others. We will train you. I could not believe it. We hugged in the street and she looked into my eyes with such love and empathy. It was overwhelming. I felt such a strong connection to her. We have so much in common with the Jordanians. They feel out pain".

Hanifa believed this was a great gift from God and joined the charity, which was run by a group of local Jordanian women as well as Jordanian women of Syrian origin (who gained citizenship through heritage or marriage to a Jordanian man). She woke up every morning and after sending her children to school, she would head to the charity and train with the other women. Whilst she used to make curtains, training to sew clothes was a new skill she was developing. In addition, the sense of hope and support in the group was enriching for Hanifa, infusing her with the self-confidence she had been seeking. After training, orders were coming in, and the women were working hard and, in return, they were generating an income to support their families for the first time since arriving in Jordan. Whilst her husband was earning enough to pay rent and bills and the UNHCR was providing a fuel allowance and food coupons for the

children, Hanifa was now supporting her family with what she called "essential extras beyond survival". That is, she was helping her son to buy equipment for his university degree in photography and filmmaking. She was paying for her eldest daughter's books for her university degree and most importantly, was able to pay for her youngest daughter to have counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (UNHCR 2013), from which she had been suffering for months.

Whilst things seemed to sail for a few months, a double tragedy hit Hanifa's household. Funding for the charity had dwindled, and thus, so did the work for the Syrian women. Furthermore, charity bazaars had lessened, and when they ran, they were saturated with the same homemade textiles, crafts, jewelry and clothing made not only by the recent Syrian refugee women, but also Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. Parallel to this, Hanifa's youngest daughter had completely broken down due to PTSD. She was now unable to sleep and lived in constant fear of her family being taken away. She refused to go to school and begged to stay at home with her mother. Hanifa could not leave her, as her daughter needed her now more than ever. Indeed, even though a year had passed since fleeing Syria, the events of the evening they escaped had haunted her daughter and led to her breakdown. She explains:

> So here I was, sat at home on this sofa hugging my daughter and comforting her for two weeks, whilst knowing that with every day I did not work I was putting my family in more danger. That is when I decided that I needed to work from home. I have always been a great cook, and us Syrians are known for our homemade cooking. But where is my network? Where are my people my support? Where do I start with the dream? Then, I spoke to my sisters who live in the Gulf and they agreed to give me some startup capital for my home cooking business. With it I bought pots, pans and the equipment I needed. I was ready to start fighting again.

Through her sisters' small start-up capital, Hanifa had the equipment to set up her home cooking business. She then began marketing herself and searching for customers. The first step was approaching her daughter's schoolteachers and suggesting catering for an afterschool dinner for

them, where they would taste her food and provide feedback on the dishes. She also hoped that if satisfied, they would spread the word amongst their friends and family and put in orders. The teachers accepted, and Hanifa catered for 30 teachers:

> It was a huge order and the first time I ever make that amount of food, but it was a team effort in our small kitchen. My husband bought the food, my daughters and I peeled and chopped the fruit and vegetables and my son borrowed his friend's van for the afternoon and delivered the food to the school. It was a great success and I got many orders after it and this was the beginning of home.cooking13.

Since the initial event, Hanifa's business has grown. Indeed, three years on, and with the help of her son, a photographer, and her daughter, who is social media savvy, Hanifa has an online presence through her Facebook and Instagram pages.[1] Hanifa has catered for events such as gym openings and food bazaars, as well as small family events. She was also asked to cater for more school events for up to 60 teachers and staff and to cater for weddings. Her biggest honor was when she was asked to cater an event for the Kuwaiti ambassador. She also joined various online communities, which had been set up by locals to support Syrian women's home cooking businesses.

Whilst Hanifa has relentlessly strived for this success, she does not claim to be the hero:

> I am not a businesswoman. This is not my business. We are a team, this is a family business. Even if my husband does not contribute directly, his support is enough. My son is the social media and marketing officer. My eldest daughter is also monitoring social media and makes leaflets and posters and my two little girls help me in the kitchen with all the preparation and cleaning thereafter. I have also taught myself accounting and finance, I mean, I had to learn about pricing!

Whilst Hanifa was trying to be positive about the current state of her business, her situation remains tumultuous. As refugees, Hanifa and her family continue to be constrained in their attempts to earn a decent living in a sustainable manner. On an individual level she has been enabled

by her strong sense of responsibility and resilience for the sake of her children, especially her daughters, yet she feels alone without the strong network that empowered her in Homs while running her casual curtain making, home-based business. On a community level, she believed the Jordanian neighbors have been friendly and supportive, yet she feels growing tensions and frustrations within the society in recent months, given the length of time the Syrians have resided in an overcrowded city like Amman. The individual and community constraints, combined with the restrictions she encounters as an entrepreneur on an institutional level, ultimately create a deadlock for growth. For example, as a Syrian refugee she is unable to obtain a driving license and thus, has to depend on her son's friend to drive his van with the food to the venues. There are occasions where she has taken taxis, but these are expensive and too small to carry big orders and boxes to store the food safely. Furthermore, while orders are growing, Hanifa's capacity as a "one woman band" is limited. Her frustration when she turns down orders is deflating. She is losing business and patrons to the many other refugee women competing in the same market, especially as a micro home-based business that is dependent on word of mouth. Indeed, while her business is arguably thriving, there are no possibilities for achieving funding or investment in supporting or growing the business or hiring employees to support her. Hanifa wishes she could grow her business, rent a bigger kitchen, employ other women and hire a delivery van to help with the logistics of the business, but there is no infrastructure available to do so. On the other hand, she has been given offers to cook for restaurants, which she would gladly take, yet fears of employing a Syrian without a work permit prevail both for herself and the local restaurant owner.

Perhaps the biggest constraint that was clear from her interviews is the emotional toll the everyday stresses of uncertainty cause. The precarious state of refugees—not knowing how long they will remain in Jordan, whether they will be able to return to Syria, whether the UNHCR will cut their funding at any moment and whether even stricter policies on work and entrepreneurship will be enforced—is probably the largest obstacle they face. Sometimes, Hanifa reflects on this, but for the majority of the time, she cannot face it and decides to keep working and moving forward for the sake of her family.

> I never expected that one day I would wake up, leave my entire life in Syria and move to Jordan. I never imagined I would run my own business. You just never know what God has planned for you. So when things happen we take responsibility and make it work. I will never sit at home and wallow… And whilst we are now surviving, I look at my life and think how much longer can we do this for?

17.4 The Crisis Continues…

As the war continues in Syria and refugees continue to flee to neighbouring countries, joint efforts between the host governments, international committees and research institutes to integrate Syrians into the local labour market is crucial to enable refugees to improve their situation, and for host countries, to reap more of the potential economic benefits from the demographic boost (Errighi and Griesse, 2016). Indeed, in March 2016, the Jordanian authorities announced that, as a part of a new deal with the EU and response to Aid agencies like the International Rescue Committee (IRC), they would allow a limited number of permits to Syrians to work legally. However, as noted earlier, women refugees are hit the hardest, and so whether these measures will include women remains to be seen, as only 7% of Syrian women in Jordan work, including the informal economy (Errighi and Griesse, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Whilst media exposure and academic research has shed a positive light on women's empowerment and poverty alleviation through entrepreneurship in various developing and transitional contexts (Welter 2011; Scott et al. 2012), it could be seen that this was indeed the case for Hanifa. Historically, feminized industries have been illustrated as a vehicle for women's empowerment and an alleviator of socioeconomic constraints, both domestically and within their community in the Arab region. However, reflecting on the literature, which emphasizes the "darker sides" of women's entrepreneurship in contexts of inferiority (Essers and Benschop 2009; Verduijn and Essers 2013), it becomes evident that Hanifa is caught in an entrepreneurial ecosystem that may offer survival, but is not sustainable in the current climate. We have yet to witness the

long-term damage and effects these may cause to the sense of self-worth and belonging of a group of people who are already suffering physically and mentally.

Notes

1. https://www.instagram.com/home.cooking13/; https://www.facebook.com/home.cooking13/.

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