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ORIGINAL PAPER

Parental Suffering and Resilience Among Recently Displaced Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Bree Akesson[1] · **Cindy Sousa**[2]

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Abstract

Objectives Parents are an essential source of constancy and support, and effectively promote children's resilience even in adversity. To build on this potential, however, more information is needed about the realities of refugee parents in situations of extreme adversity such as war and displacement.

Methods The present study draws upon data from collaborative family interviews with 46 families ($n = 351$) who fled Syria and are now living as refugees in Lebanon.

Results The findings describe the challenges parents faced and the ways they attempted to endure within three temporal dimensions: the past (pre-flight and flight); the present (initial resettlement in the Lebanon); and the future (hopes and aspirations for resettlement). From the start of the war, parents' foremost priority was protecting their children. Parents spoke about distress caused by family separation, and the loss of the norms, social support, and sense of parental efficacy. Parents also described their own mental health issues related to war and displacement, which influenced their parenting. At the same time, parents' narratives highlighted how they continued—and even amplified—their caregiving. Parents comforted and distracted their children to help them endure the challenging realties of war and displacement. In Lebanon, parents restricted their children's mobility to try to keep them safe, provided moral guidance, increased family closeness and communication, and planned for children's futures, particularly through education.

Conclusions Programs to support child protection must broaden the focus to include the whole family unit, specifically the mental health of caregivers as a means of supporting family wellbeing. (250/250 words).

Keywords Syrian refugees · parenting · War · Displacement · Family · Resilience

The current crisis in Syria—identified as the worst humanitarian crises in the modern era (Government of Lebanon and United Nations 2017) and the largest displacement of people in the world (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) et al. 2018)—illustrates the grievous nature of the refugee experience. Since the start of the conflict in March 2011, 5.5 million Syrians have been displaced. Half of Syrian refugees are under the age of 18 while 40% are under the age of 12 (Sirin and Rogers-Sirin 2015).

✉ Bree Akesson
bakesson@wlu.ca

[1] Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, 20 Charlotte Street, RCE 139, Brantford, ON N3T 2W2, Canada

[2] Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research, Bryn Mawr College, 101 North Merion Avenue, Bryn Mawr, PA 19010-2899, USA

In Lebanon, approximately one million Syrian refugees have been officially registered with UNHCR, representing the second largest population of Syrian refugees in the region and the highest per capita population of refugees in the world (UNHCR et al. 2018). 74% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have legal residency, over half live in extreme poverty, 90% are in debt, and 91% report food insecurity (UNHCR et al. 2018). Discrimination, fear, and oppressive Lebanese government policies hinder Syrian families' access to services (Akesson and Coupland 2018). Reports of hostility, neglect, and exploitation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are common, including growing violence and restrictions on mobility, employment, housing, and public services for both Syrian children and adults (Reidy 2018).

Recent overviews of empirical scholarship demonstrate that the family context is vital for the wellbeing of children facing and fleeing from political violence (Newnham et al. 2018; Sousa 2013). For refugees, the family is often the

most important—and sometimes the only—source of constancy (APA. 2010; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). These findings support long-held theories of child development, many of which arose from work with children during and immediately after World War II. These theories posit that children's healthy development depends on parents providing them with ample and appropriate instruction, monitoring, nurturance, and responsiveness (Bowlby 1969; Freud and Burlingham 1943; Winnicott 1991).

In line with these theories of child development, later work on family resilience emphasizes the fundamental connections between children's and parents' resilience (Walsh 2016). This interest in parental resilience—which is typically defined at the process of parents overcoming substantial challenges to effectively care for their children (Gavidia-Payne et al. 2015)—is situated within a larger body of research on resilience. This scholarship increasingly suggests that resilience is not a static trait to be measured, but rather an ongoing, dynamic process that can only be understood within a socio-ecological framework (Ungar 2011). Viewed thusly, theorists suggest parental resilience depends on not only parents' psychological wellbeing, self-efficacy, optimism, knowledge, and skills, but also the resources they have available and their sense of social connectedness (Gavidia-Payne et al. 2015; Walsh 2016). In line with classical theories of stress and coping, a focus on parental resilience includes an analysis of how parents respond to stressors in the environment via ongoing processes of coping and adaptation (Lazarus 2000).

There is clearly growing emphasis on the dynamic and socially situated idea of parental resilience within the scholarship on child and family wellbeing. More in-depth exploration of strategies that parents use to help themselves and their families cope will help promote further understanding of this dynamic, especially among refugee families. More information about the various risk and protective factors within the family context, will therefore facilitate both effective research and practice among refugee families so that the realities and predictors of effective parenting among refugees are better understood (Murphy et al. 2017).

Most of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon are families, and 58% of Syrian refugee households have children under the age of five (UNHCR et al. 2018). These families have endured considerable hardship with each phase of the refugee experience—pre-flight, flight, and resettlement (Lustig et al. 2004)—posing its own unique challenges for families.

In pre-flight, families may endure horrific acts associated with war and armed conflicts, including ground invasions, shootings, bombardments, torture, and the calculated denial of basic needs and human rights (Sidel and Levy 2008; Sousa Haj-Yahia et al. 2013). A recent geographically representative study of randomly sampled Syrian refugee children in Lebanon ($N = 481$) found that 47% had witnessed bombings and 31% had heard about murders or deaths (Escot et al. 2016). 30% of the children in this same study reported flashbacks and 22% reported nervousness or restlessness.

Once the upheaval and danger in the home country reaches a critical point, and families decide to flee, they encounter additional hardship, grief, and uncertainty that accompanies the loss of all that was familiar including their homes, schools, work, and places of religious and cultural significance, along with facing separation from other family members and communities (American Psychological Association (APA. 2010).

Resettlement in "temporary" spaces often poses new risks for the family, including additional violence and overcrowding, and struggles related to nutrition, education, and healthcare. Indeed, evidence shows that Syrian refugee children resettling in Lebanon face particular risks related to adjustment and integration. One report found that Syrian adolescent girls living in Lebanon experienced enormous physical and social isolation and widespread discrimination and harassment; boys experienced discrimination, physical violence, and humiliation and exploitation as child laborers (Mercy Corps. 2014).

As they acclimate to their new environment, families often face profound struggles over their respective roles and family communication, along with struggles over identity, culture, and connection to their community, extended family, and language (El-Khani et al. 2016). Parents who were confident and effective in their parenting style prior to war may find their interactions with their children altered by the challenges of living in a context of uncertainty and fear (Betancourt and Khan 2008). In addition to these changing roles, parents' ability to provide care is often hindered by their own experiences of trauma and adversity while struggling to cope with their family's needs.

Maladaptive parental coping in the context of war can lead to increased incidence of children's exposure to interfamilial conflict and violence, harsh discipline and punitive parenting styles, and/or emotional neglect (Betancourt et al. 2015; Betancourt 2015). Other research has found that high levels of anxiety, stress, and depression in parents are associated with unresponsive, neglectful, and sometimes abusive parenting practices, leading to low levels of parent-child attachment (Field 2010). This has a cumulative effect, impacting children's development and with enduring implications for physical, intellectual, and psychosocial wellbeing (Belsky and de Haan 2011; Shonkoff et al. 2012).

At the same time, families demonstrate resilience even within traumatic situations, due in large part to how parents promote family wellbeing (Barber 2013; Betancourt and Khan 2008; Sousa et al. 2013). Support and acceptance from parents, family cohesion, and secure parent-child

relationships all seem to offer at least some degree of protection for children from the physical and psychological effects of war and displacement (Cummings et al. 2009; Sousa et al. 2013).

As with other work on the topic of mental health among children and families who are refugees, the interconnectedness of parent and child wellbeing was reinforced in a recent study that explored the relationship between war and displacement and parenting among Syrian families living in Lebanon (Sim et al. 2018). The research found that economic hardship complicates parents' ability to provide for their children's basic needs, negative mental health of parents can lead to harsh parenting, and insecurity within the community can lead to increased parental control over their children. Another study of Syrian refugee parents and children describes the grief and guilt that parents encounter, along with the challenges they face regarding communicating and parenting their children (El-Khani et al. 2016).

The continual development of knowledge related to family context of resiliency within the various phases of the refugee experience is critical, as we are still quite early in the conceptualization of and planning for refugee services in ways that respect the experiences and practices of parents (Fazel and Betancourt 2018; Murphy et al. 2017; Slobodin and de Jong 2015). In particular, knowledge about the wellbeing of refugee children and families expands, more attention to the multiplicity of factors that undergird parental resilience across multiple levels of influence, including the individual, family, community, and the larger socio-economic-political context is required (Gavidia-Payne et al. 2015).

In line with this priority, the aim of the present study is to both add to and extend existing work on the links between parent, child, and family wellbeing for Syrian refugees (Akesson and Badawi in press; El-Khani et al. 2016; Sim et al. 2018). In line with the theoretical framework discussed above, this paper intentionally explores parental resilience, treating it as an ongoing process that depends on factors internal to parents and within the parents' social environments (Gavidia-Payne et al. 2015). Therefore, in addition to addressing how war and displacement overwhelm parents' coping mechanisms, this paper will also outline how parents provide love and support to their families. Despite such extreme adversity.

Method

Participants

Initial selection of families took place in partnership with various community and international organizations providing services to Syrian families in three distinct regions of Lebanon: northern Lebanon, Beirut, and Bekaa Valley. Aligned with cultural norms, participating families were recruited through word of mouth and invited to participate in a Canadian government-funded study to explore the experiences of Syrian families in Lebanon.

Aligned with ethical research practice guidelines, participants were given the right to refuse to participate in the study. They were repeatedly assured that their participation or non-participation in the research would not influence the services they receive from organizations that referred them to the study. However, they were also informed that findings from the research had the potential to inform practice and policy, which could indirectly lead to improvements in their current situation. Of the 46 families who were introduced by the community and international organizations and subsequently approached by the research team, all 46 families agreed to participate in the study.

As shown in Table 1, the interviews included 312 immediate family members (e.g., mother, father, children) and 39 extended family members (e.g., aunts, grandmothers, cousins).

Procedure

The collaborative family interview was the cornerstone of this study's data collection procedure and included additional data collection methods—drawing, mapmaking—beyond a traditional one-on-one interview. At the beginning of each collaborative family interview, the research team gathered demographic data about the family and entered the data into an interview feedback form (IFF), which also included our team's reflections on the research process. A brief questionnaire was administered to family members to collect data on mental health, safety, and food insecurity.

Lasting between one and two hours, collaborative family interviews were guided by questions about the families' experiences in the context of war, flight, and displacement. Collaborative family interviews followed a chronological life course format: (1) life in Syria before the war, (2) life in Syria during the war, (3) making the decision to leave Syria, (4) the journey from Syria to Lebanon, (5) life in Lebanon,

Table 1 Family demographics

	Immediate family		Extended family		Total
Adults (18+)	Male (father)	36	Male	7	**43**
	Female (mother)	44	Female	13	**57**
	80		**20**		**100**
Children (<18)	Male	117	Male	9	**126**
	Female	115	Female	10	**125**
	232		**19**		**251**
Total	**312**		**39**		**351**

and (6) dreams for the future. Children were engaged in the collaborative family interviews through drawing and map-making following the same chronological life course format. Time and space was provided for the participants—both adults and children—to ask us questions about the research team's backgrounds, interests in this topic, as well as more specific questions about the research design and goals. After the collaborative family interview, the research team used the IFF to meaningfully reflect on the process and document their experiences.

After one week, the research team revisited the family for a follow-up interview. During this final interview, the family were asked to reflect upon their experiences over the past week and to share anything else that they perhaps did not get a chance to share during the first interview.

The research team also conducted three focus group discussions with Lebanese community workers and Syrian refugee outreach volunteers, as well as three semi-structured interviews with individuals who were working directly with Syrian families in Lebanon. Combined, the focus group discussions and practitioner interviews included 11 individuals. The research methodology also included participant-observation of field agencies working with refugee families, attendance at meetings with aid organizations and local community-based organizations, and visits to informal settlements and other places refugee families were living.

Data Analyses

With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded during the collaborative family and practitioner interviews. The audio-recorded interviews were translated and transcribed by bilingual research team members. All participants' names were changed to pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. Aligned with Arabic cultural norms, parents are given the honorary title of *abu-* (father of) and *umm-* (mother of), followed by the name of their first born son. We have used these identifiers throughout the findings to indicate mothers and fathers.

After fieldwork was complete, research team members met for a two hour conference call every two weeks to discuss the transcripts and any emerging themes. Keeping in mind these preliminary themes identified by the larger research team, the first author and a research assistant analyzed the data through careful reading and collation of transcripts to ascertain meaning and significance that participants attributed to their experiences. Transcripts were then coded and concepts were generated and categorized into themes, one of which was parenting. The research assistant and first author developed further sub-themes under the theme of parenting. The second author then examined the sub-themes related to parenting, providing another layer of analysis. The first author then joined the second author to confirm and present the sub-themes we describe in this paper. Data analysis was facilitated through Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), a web application for both qualitative and mixed methods research, which we used to code the data and help organize themes.

Results

This study was driven by theories related to stress and coping, and particularly to the ongoing process of resilience (or continual adaptation) on the part of parents. Our themes follow these points, detailing parents' experiences of parental crisis and parental coping.

The Past: War and Flight

Parental crisis within the trauma and stress of war and flight

Interviews highlighted the terrible experiences families endured in Syria. These findings underscored the conditions of war, violence, and deprivation. As parents shared about the experiences leading up to their decision to flee, they shared accounts of sheer terror: regular indiscriminate shootings; women being whipped if they went out without full cover; masked men running around with guns and entering houses; being made to witness executions; dead civilians being left about with no burials. As just one of many examples, grandmother Umm-Maarav shared, "They started walking into our homes killing everyone indiscriminately. They would walk in, shoot at us, and throw gasoline and try to burn us." Umm-Karam, a 42-year-old mother of six shared their children saw neighbors and friends who had been killed, saying, "Two days after we fled, one of our neighbors' sons was abducted, killed and tortured. His corpse was then left at his family's front door." In this interview, her nine year old twins drew the dead body of their neighbor, drowning in his blood, at the door. Both drew themselves standing in front of him and crying. Mother of six, 32-year-old Umm-Nour told a terrible story about her children being forced by ISIS to witness executions: "If we did not go, we would be whipped. They used to drag the children as well. The decapitated head fell into my daughter's lap. At first she thought it was a toy because it was bouncing around and then it fell onto her head and the blood splattered all over her face." Interviewers noted the this child does not speak.

Parents shared the painful reality of being unable to shield their children from the realities of the war, which, in part, compelled parents' decision to flee Syria. We asked parents to reflect on the communication between themselves and their children at this juncture. In examining the data, we

were attuned to what children shared with parents about their thoughts or feelings (if anything) and what parents shared with children in terms of explanations (if anything). In one family interview, the 42-year-old mother of six Umm-Karam said, "[My daughter] does not remember anything. She is too young. We do not tell her anything about it. Why would we tell her about destruction and bombing?" Similarly, 37-year-old mother of six, Umm-Mahmoud explained:

> The [children] wanted to leave, as they were scared of the war…. They could see everyone on the news and on television. They said they wanted to escape the situation. We decided to leave before exposing the children to such things.

Narratives related to the decision to flee revolved primarily around the urgency of protecting children. 35-year-old mother of five, Umm-Ibrahim said, "Everything just happened so suddenly. Our situation was very bad and our kids were living in terror. The kids don't know what war is; they only know oh this bomb blew up or this person got injured. Sometimes we would find bullets on the floor in front of our doorway." Umm-Ghani, a 27-year-old mother of five, shared, "When the bombings started, we couldn't live there anymore." She went on to say: "The children, even we, the adults, felt scared and worried." One father, 38-year-old Abu-Ammar, said that they stayed three years, even after their house was bombed, because "I promised myself not to leave even if the roof was to fall over our heads." He said, "Our life turned upside down. Our diets changed. Everything changed." And in the end he said that the children became terrified, and that prompted the family to leave, taking only their clothes. Another father, 39-year-old Abu-Rais, who has five children, said, "I left because of my children. They were afraid; my eldest used to cry every time she heard any sound. We stayed about three years before we left, but we left because of the bombings." Another refugee family described that once, during a bombardment, they lost their four year old son for about four hours. The 38-year-old mother of nine described how this had caused such trauma that he still has not recovered:

> …this boy used to talk just like us but when the bombing started and the planes came on top of our houses, we went out at night, I took all of my children and then lost this one at night. I went to another area, we searched for him at night and didn't find him… He used to talk fluently, one time after the bombing we ran away and he got lost and ever since that he doesn't talk anymore. It takes a long time for him to express himself and I have to wait a lot to understand what he wants.

It was not that parents did not feel torn about leaving. Rather, they shared the difficult, but unquestionable decision to flee their oftentimes beloved home in order to safeguard their children. For example, 38 year-old Abu-Mahmoud, father of six, explained,

> Even if someone is dying, then they still wouldn't leave their homes. It wasn't until those terrible people walked into our country, and started killing people and slaughtering children that we decided to flee….

The decision to leave was often driven by fear not only for the family's physical safety but for their stability and overall wellbeing in a context in which they were struggling to survive without livelihoods, education, or social services, challenging their ability to meet the needs of the family. As Abu-Mahmoud described, "In Syria, I used to have a ceramics factory, and I was a real estate agent. I had property, storage rooms, farms. But when there was a massacre in our region and 360 people died, we left everything and found a car heading to Lebanon."

In describing flight, parents shared the multiple times that they had to relocate. 33-year-old mother of four, Umm-Rafik shared that in Syria, they relocated to two different areas and that once in the capital city of Damascus they relocated twice again. Umm-Rafik's husband, 39-year-old Abu-Rafik went on to describe how only men could leave Syria, not families, so he separated from his family:

> We moved to different places. I wanted to go to Lebanon with my family. At the checkpoint, the soldier said that they can't let families leave Syria, only men. So, I went to Lebanon and left my family back in Syria. Later, my wife entered illegally with the children through the mountains.

Like this family, many parents described the family moving from area to area, via vehicles if they could, or else on foot, as they desperately sought safety. In fleeing, parents talked about family members being separated; fathers might come first, to try to arrange details, while mothers stayed and gathered paperwork. Others were separated more dramatically. One mother, Umm-Ahmed, said:

> I came with a flood of people. That's when I lost my husband, between all of those people, and the plane was striking. We got to a deserted land. There were no mountains so wherever you walked the plane could see you. For two days. For two days I slept outside with my kids until we got to Lebanon. I lost my husband. 4 months. These incidents that I went through, incidents that I've never seen except for in Syria. (starts tearing up) People and children, dying. I

> never saw that except in Syria. No matter how many things happened in other countries, we never saw things like in Syria.

Parental coping

In the context of multiple displacements, parents shared how they tried to help their children endure flight by attempting to comfort, distract, and feed them. Umm-Mahmoud shared, "I was always keeping them next to me. I was very scared. They were very hungry. We bought them bread on the way." Parents described trying to alleviate their children's fears, as with 37-year-old father of seven, Abu-Farid, who said, "Of course there was fear. But we, as parents…tried to reduce this [fear] to 80%."

Parents talked about hiding their own pain to help their children. For example, one mother of six, Umm-Layth, said, "I would cry, I would be more afraid than my children, but how can I tell them I'm afraid?" When we asked 31-year-old mother Umm-Fares how she alleviated the stress of the situation for her children, she replied:

> … when we heard something we would tell them, 'Don't be afraid. That sound that you heard is far away. There is nothing to be afraid of.' When the kids [would] say, 'They will come,' we would tell them, 'No one will come, don't be scared." But of course, [with] all of the fears that we're keeping away from them, we are the ones who are carrying it.

The Present: Life and Parenting During Resettlement

Parental crisis within resettlement

Parents spoke about the loss of a sense of their role as a parent. Some mentioned how, in Syria, they could act as both provider and protector for their children. They understood the culture and environment, and they felt they had a sense of parental competence. But the context of resettlement depleted their sense of competence and became a parental crisis. Parents spoke about how in Syria, the family had a good life, could go out to restaurants, and see friends. Now, they can no longer afford to take them on outings to the zoo or amusement parks, or buy them simple treats because they have to worry so much about rent, electricity, and medication. One mother Umm-Marwan said that "… because of the monetary situation, we are not able to go anywhere to get away or just to smell fresh air."

Abu-Rafik shared that "…before the crisis, they [the children] had everything. They wanted for nothing." When asked what he feels in Lebanon, and if he felt like he is able to fulfill his role as a father the way he would like, he responded by sharing the distress he feels at not being able to provide for his children. He described how he has a physically challenged child and when this child asks for money to go to the canteen or money to go buy an apple, he has to say he doesn't have it. He continued,

> I need to pay for bread and for the tent. I am not providing them anything at all. I can't take them out in summer. For example, to take them to the beach or any place to just get fresh air, I can't do that. First because of the residency permit, and second because of the financial status…. Sometimes I wish that my children don't ask anything from me, because I can't get them anything.

Related to a crisis related to parental competence, parents spoke about the ways that the experience robs children of their childhood, a developmental stage that parents are supposed to safeguard. For example, Nacira, a Lebanese UN worker and a single mother, explained, "I feel sometimes that when you talk to a child as if he's not a child, that he considers [himself] responsible for his own family, and [he] thinks, 'What can [I] do to support the family." She went on to say, "There's confusion. As a child, like, they are starting to think like adults."

One mother of four, Umm-Haythan, stated, "We spend most of our days in sadness. We have nothing provided." She talked about how parents just work to make rent and eat. She also shared that the children do not go anywhere but to school and back home. Many parents, in fact, shared they didn't let their children play much and kept them very close. Related, as well, to feelings of insecurity in a new place, parents reported that the unfamiliar environment of displacement creates a sense that they cannot maintain a sense of parental control. One father of five, Abu-Yousef, shared that his kids go to school, visit with their cousins, "... but no one else. I do not encourage them to mingle with other people a lot. I prefer to keep them safe and under control." To maintain a feeling of control, parents shared a common coping strategy to keep their children indoors and within sight to try to protect them. In this way, parents were clinging to some semblance of control in an environment that they felt they were unable to control. However, this approach has consequences for how children explore, learn, and develop.

Data from parents themselves suggest other challenges regarding childrearing in their difficult new context, particularly related to isolation and control of children. Umm-Ghani described:

> Disciplining in Syria is much different and easier than here. [Here] there are no people around me, I am alone

> with my mother-in-law and [my children]. I don't work, and I barely go outside. Back in Syria, I would close the house door, and I would know that they won't leave. But here, I have to chase after them, and bring them back home.

Later in the interview, Umm-Ghani also described a crisis related to parental power she feels in her new environment, as she no longer lives in her own house, but with an extended family. She said, "I used to raise my children in my own house, in a certain way. But now it's changed, because there are other people living with us. Even the children's temperament changed. They fight a lot and their playing [has] changed."

Parents were also dealing with their own mental health issues related to war and displacement. Parents found it difficult to address their children's needs when they were struggling to meet their own needs. This was highlighted in an interview with a UN worker, Nacira, who said, "I feel even the parents are still traumatized from what is happening to them, and it [is] affecting how they are dealing with their own children." Our data from Nacira pointed to how the trauma that parents face may influence their parenting. She continued,

> …parents are mainly becoming aggressive. So this is also…a problem. …For example, sometimes when the child is waiting at the protection desk, I can see that he cries, and maybe the mother slaps him on the face…So the mother is angry, but, and then she, all of her anger goes down to the child, because he's the weakest in the family, you know? Like she cannot yell at her husband, because she should respect her husband, culturally. So mainly [the anger] goes to the children.

Parental coping

As with the narratives about the experience of surviving the war and the experience of flight, parents' narratives highlighted both their parental crises and the ways they copied, or even amplified, the caregiving they did. One way this was apparent was through moral guidance. Regardless of the situation they faced, parents talked about being an example of tolerance and love for their children. Abu-Farid explained:

> We love socializing and communities. We integrate with everyone, all traditions, cultures and sects. Because we believe in peace. …. We love everyone, and we wish good for everyone. There are some bad people in the camp. There are people who bother you, but I have and need to tolerate them. As long as we are neighbors, I need to be an example to my kids so that my kids won't be like them and so that my kids (when they grow up) say, 'Our dad was patient. Our dad was good and tolerating.'

Abu-Farid's words also point to the importance of the social context for parents. To Abu-Farid, "socializing and communities" are pivotal protective factors that help with his parenting. Parents also talked about increasing communication with their children about the realities of the situation. For instance, when asked what they do to reduce the pressure on their children, Umm-Rafik said, "I try to talk to them. They understand when I talk to them." When asked what she talks about, she answered, "About school, their futures, about how things won't stay as they are. They'll get better." This mother's narrative points to the ways that parents try to create a sense of future for their children, despite the present reality. Her insistence here that she speak with her children in a way that engenders hope is reflected in the response of Abu-Rafik to the question about how he helps his children cope. He stated, "If you don't forget about things you'll get all the diseases in the world. That's why you need to laugh. We laugh with the children to forget and overcome our problems."

Service providers also noted the ways that parents nurtured hope through a sense of optimism and a closeness within the family. UN worker, Nacira, explained:

> But even before receiving any assistance from UNHCR, the family was so positive. And they were still positive towards themselves, among themselves, and listening to each other very respectful. I really…I won't forget this family. I was really inspired by the hope they have. They will they have to continue, even though they had like really bad living conditions.

Nacira called another mother "a symbol of power and resilience," stating, "She never lost hope, even though she lost the most important things in her life."

The responsibility to protect children from the current reality also has consequences for parents, as they may feel an additional burden to conceal their own emotional reactions for the sake of their children. Umm-Rafik, for instance, shared that she tries to "... never show my children that I feel bad," saying, "How can I protect my children and treat them to make sure that I don't let my bad mood affect my children?"

The Future: Longing and Imagining

Parental crisis in looking to the future for their children

Grappling with the loss of home, both the family home and the country, is an ongoing challenge for refugee families.

Parents talked about longing to return to their homes and their country. Mother of six, 44 year old Umm-Mahdi, said of her children, "I dream for them to reach somewhere and not to stay in this kind of situation, not knowing which pillow they slept the night. Now they're in Lebanon but all they see is Syria. My son wakes up every day and tells me I want to go back to Syria and asks me when will we be doing that." Umm-Karam said, "We cannot stay all our life here; we want to go back to Homs where we spent our childhood and where our family and friends are. No matter where we go we will always go back (to Syria)." In this same vein, the people we interviewed emphasized home will always be Syria, as evident in the reply of Umm-Fares, who said, "In one's country, one feels free, but in another strange country, you don't feel as free."

In war, being divested of the normal supports and conditions of raising children also represents a loss of the normal parenting task of imagining and preparing for a future for your children. Reflecting back to the theme of parents feeling divested of their role, when asked about her dreams for her children, Umm-Fadel simply stated that she wished they could "be like [other] kids - not in need of anything."

Parental coping

In terms of imagining a better life for their children, the stories that parents shared reflected the ways they continue to plan for a future with and for their children. One way this was done was through hopes for immigrating somewhere else. As father of two Abu-Iman said, "Are we going to spend our whole lives in this camp? This isn't called a life."

Parents shared their strong wishes to be able to immigrate with their families to somewhere safe, somewhere good for their children. One father of five, Abu-Ammar, said, "My life doesn't matter to me anymore. But I'm thinking about the children. If I wanted to immigrate, the only reason behind it would be providing my children with a better environments/ensuring that they'd have better lives." And the mother, Umm-Amar, continued, "I like to be optimistic, I like to see my children growing up to be educated with good jobs." 40-year-old father of nine, Abu-Adib, said, "My whole dream is attached to leaving to Canada. I want our children to get educated. I want to go back to my normal routine, where I go to work and come back. I want to go back to living my life." Other parents as well said they wanted to travel so their kids could get an education,

In the above quote, parents' focus on education for children was central to their planning and imagining for the future. Schooling represents safety, comfort, and hope for the future. Umm-Iman, mother of two, asserted that if they "stay in Lebanon, my children won't graduate." Umm-Mahdi said, "I dream for my children. That God gives them better days and that they'll succeed and continue learning." Umm-Ghani stated, "My biggest dream is for my children to get educated, because education is the most important thing. Not just for the boy to learn, but also girls. They're equals." In the case of the Umm-Ghani, she was asked what dreams she has for herself, and replied, "My dreams would all be fulfilled if my children just get an education. They're more important than everyone, than myself, and even my husband. So, having them get an education is all that I ask and hope for."

Discussion

Our paper adds to the growing literature base on the parenting practices of families displaced by war, and specifically families affected by the war in Syria. In so doing, this work both extends and expands upon the existing literature in exploring how parents and children, together, describe the lived realities of suffering and resilience within the parent-child relationship across multiple temporal dimensions of the refugee experience.

The results of this study provides additional evidence to support the notion that parents play a crucial role for children within the experience of political violence, flight, and resettlement (El-Khani et al. 2016; Sousa et al. 2013). In particular, our findings point to multiple ways that parenting may be undermined throughout the refugee experience, as well as the ways that parents struggle to continue caregiving. In particular, in line with other literature, our analyses point to the ways that war and the refugee experience might fundamentally shift family roles (Williams 2010), destabilizing the ways in which parents might fulfill their responsibilities (Bradley 2007). The findings underscore that war severely compromised not only the individual wellbeing of parents and children, but also threatened to undermine the parent-child relationship, a finding that resonates in other research conducted with parents in war-affected contexts (Reed et al. 2012; Sim et al. 2018).

Importantly, many of our findings point to the importance of economic wellbeing for parents and how parental wellbeing is intimately tied to the parents' financial situation, a topic that has been explored in another publication resulting from this study (Akesson and Badawi in press). However, the importance of economic security for these parents is so great that it is important to reiterate. Our data demonstrate how economical fragility caused by political conflict and the refugee experience undergirds a crisis in the parental role.

Yet, our data also showed that parents are resilient, resourceful, and motivated to remain in their caregiving role. This was especially apparent in parents' commitment

to ensure that their children received a good education even in such a destabilizing context, which is aligned with findings of the experiences of parents in other war-affected contexts (Akesson 2015). Indeed, they not only wanted to feel successful, but there was some indication in our data that parental mental health would greatly benefit from increasing their sense of efficacy as a parent, particularly when their other roles were so severely undermined due to the war and upheaval. Evidence of the importance of a strengths-based perspective, which focuses on what parents are already doing well, reinforces our conclusion that parents persevere in their attempts at caregiving even in the most difficult of circumstances. In this sense, our findings align very much with the notion that resilience, particularly as it applies to coping with war and political violence, is not a static trait, that people either do or do not possess, but rather an ongoing process that may look very distinct across the stressors they face (Barber 2013).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As in any study, ours also has several limitations that have the potential to impact the study's results. First, the method of collaborative family interview is effective in revealing family interactions. However, interviewing the whole family together—both children and adults together—has the potential to create a context of unequal power relations within the interview process. At times, parents may not have been as forthcoming about their experiences of parenting due to their children's presence in the room. The multiple research methods used at different points in time attempted to ensure that all family members had an opportunity to convey their experiences to the research team. Second, although the findings were developed in conjunction with the larger research team, we were unable to return to the research participants to validate our conclusions via member-checking. Therefore, our findings are grounded in the experiences of parents at one point in time. Finally, our procedures for coding data and organizing and refining themes was quite in-depth, and had input from multiple people. Yet this data is extremely rich and complex, emerging from one of the most catastrophic humanitarian tragedies of our time. This project therefore requires continual exploration of the data and themes, particularly in light of growing theoretical work on parenting within complex emergencies (Bradley 2007; Murphy et al. 2017).

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Author Contributions BA designed and executed the study, conducted the initial data analysis, co-wrote the first draft, and collaborated in the writing and editing of the final manuscript. CS conducted a secondary data analysis, co-wrote the first draft, and collaborated in the writing and editing of the final manuscript.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Standards All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (#5013) and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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