



The educational experiences of Syrian women in countries of safety/asylum

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ABSTRACT

The Syrian crisis has resulted in a large refugee movement of Syrian citizens from inside Syria, to countries of safety/asylum, notably Turkey. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.7 million Syrian women refugees in Turkey. This research uses Freire's framing of oppressors and facilitators in education to look at how the war has impacted on the education of women their country of safety/asylum. Interviews were conducted with 24 refugee women, and the findings presented to a user focus group of Syrian refugee women. Findings indicate that language and finance are key barriers to women fulfilling their educational potential. Changes in the roles of women in countries of safety/asylum are key opportunities that could be exploited by women. Findings also indicated that non-government organisations must co-design educational provision with refugees in order to ensure that opportunities are maximised.

Introduction

With the continuation of the Syrian crisis, which started in 2011 and is now entering its tenth year, one of the significant effects of this crisis has been the large refugee movement of Syrian citizens from inside Syria, to countries of safety/asylum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees statistics indicate that about 3.6 million Syrian refugees are presently in Turkey (DGMM, 2020), of which 1.7 million are women (UNHCR, 2016). Refugees are mainly distributed throughout 12 southern Turkish states (Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, 2020).

This manuscript will report in a research project that aims to examine what affect the war has had on refugee women from Syria. Data will be gathered using interviews and user focus groups. We will explore what facilitators and oppressors, have action on refugee women. We will explore what this group think about non-government organisation (NGO) and government, provision and how that can be optimised to cater to their needs. The work will use a theoretical frame of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed examining and exploring issues of language, displacement, the wider, and often changing, role of refugee women in Syrian society and finance.

Literature review

The UNHCR (2016) report on the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey reported that Syrian refugees were suffering from a loss of hope

for return to their country of origin. Refugees reported that they felt there were limited opportunities to earn a living, a lack of appropriate educational opportunities, and an overall anxiety regarding their long-term security and safety. Women reported that they had a changing role in society and there was more need for them to gain employment to support themselves and their wider families. This raised the issue of the provision of skills, training and education for women that would help in this respect. These issues were particularly pronounced for girls of school age, as parents could often refuse to send them to mixed schools, or there may only be places for them in the afternoon (Ackerman, 2014). This arrangement is mirrored in Lebanon where Syrian refugee children were reported only to be guaranteed places in school in the afternoon shift (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

According to Jayaweera (2010) 'Education was widely perceived as an indicator of the status of women and even more importantly, as an agent for the empowerment of women'. Research using macro statistics on countries in Asia presented in the United Nations Human Development Report (1995) concluded that there was no positive linear relationship between education and the economic, social and political empowerment of women. The UN explained the lack of a relationship by concluding that, as a consequence of the interface of gender ideologies and social and economic structural constraints systemic change was limited within the refugee communities. Put simply the family and culture constrained the role of education as an agent for the empowerment of women. Conversely, Sonowal (2013) concluded that education was the key factor for women's empowerment, prosperity, development and welfare and that

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discrimination against women was widespread and contributed to continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors - economic, education, social, political, health care, nutrition, rights and legal in the state of Assam in India. This resulted in the oppression of women all spheres and phases of life. Sonowal (2013) proposed that in order to fight against socially constructed gender biases, women have to fight against a system. In order to do this empowerment was required, and this empowerment came from the education of women.

Turkey, Aras and Yasun (2016) assessed the educational opportunities and challenges of Syrian refugees in Turkey and evaluated the role of Temporary Education Centers (TEC) in integrating Syrian students into the Turkish educational system. They also researched student access education and made judgements regarding the quality of education on offer. It should be noted that their work did not specifically focus on the education of women. While the researchers did not focus specifically on women, their research concluded that up to 65% of Syrians will remain in Turkey after the war is concluded, leaving approximately 572,000 children who will need to integrate into the Turkish education system to complete their education. The integration of such a large number of students will be a challenge and an opportunity for Turkey as they feed through into the Turkish economy. In their work, Aras and Yasun (2016) interviewed the leaders of 12 TECs located in four socio-economically diverse districts in Istanbul, as well as a representative from each of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Education and one NGO leader. The primary recommendations of their report were there needed to be changes to:

- Finance-Providing free school meals, uniform and transport and removing school fees
- Provision-Ensuring gaps in learning caused by displacement were addressed, that emotional needs of students were also catered for, and that the curriculum also provides vocational training for employment.
- Coordination-Ensuring Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), local municipalities, TECs, and the relevant ministries provide a coordinated educational response to the crisis.
- Resources-Attracting highest quality teachers with appropriate salary structures and providing learning and teaching resources to all TECs.

Other studies have found specific challenges surrounding education and integration for refugee women. Watkins, Raze and Richters (2012) examined the factors influencing English language education, participation and achievement amongst Burmese Karen refugee women in Australia. Data were drawn from ethnographic observations and interviews with 67 participants between 2009 and 2011, collected as part of a larger qualitative study exploring the well-being of Karen refugee women in Sydney. Participants reported having difficulty in mastering the English language and that communicating in English was the most significant issue limiting their well-being. The authors (2012) reported that gendered, cultural and socio-political factors act as barriers to education. The research concluded that greater sensitivity to and awareness of the background of refugees, with respect to their culture and gender was required by educators to ensure that they took these issues into account when planning pedagogies.

Even well-educated refugee women can experience issues when displaced as refugees. Cohen (2010) looked at historical educational experiences of a specific group of refugees, namely academic women refugees who were members of various branches of the International Federation of University Women, and who came to Britain under the auspices of the British Federation of University Women from 1933. As a consequence of persecution and forced migration, about 400 such women from Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Austria sought entry to Britain following Hitler's accession to power in Germany in 1933. Even educated and well qualified women did not always find their qualifications and training accepted in their country of safety. This is a problem that is still pronounced for male Syrian refugees. A recent study documented

the poignant and moving experiences of displaced academic refugees and their battle to maintain a sense of academic self, whilst being a refugee (McLaughlin et al., 2020).

A phenomenological study explored how Sudanese refugee women perceive and interpreted their experiences in formal education programmes and how these experiences influence the resettlement process (Leslie, 2011). The study examined the lived experiences of nine Sudanese refugee women as they reflected on their education experiences. The unique nature of additional support for refugee women was highlighted by these participants. These included the need to learn the language of the country of resettlement, find a job and adjust to social and cultural norms. The participants suggested that participating in formal education would assist refugee women in the resettlement process by fulfilling many of these needs. Most significantly, they reported that education developed a sense of empowerment and the agency necessary for them to redefine their lives and advocate for social change.

There are other issues that affect the access to education of women. Other conflicts have highlighted the plight of women in wars. When refugees and westernised cultures meet there can be mixed effects. Equitable educational pathways were reported to be integrated into educational policy discourses in Australia, and amongst Sudanese refugees, there are still significant gendered barriers to educational participation amongst members of the Sudanese refugee groups. Cultural factors play a key role in this. Sudanese refugees who arrived in Australia as part of the humanitarian programme were reported to experience extensive linguistic barriers in accessing educational opportunities (Kek & Huijser, 2011). These can be particularly pronounced for women. As the war in Mozambique progressed between 1972 and 1992, women were reported to have found new and changing structures/forms of the family (Baden, 1997) during the conflict, and post-conflict. These new family structures were reported to show an increased number of families headed by women, and often included orphaned children (who may have lost their own family unit as a result of displacement, the loss of their parents and even having been conscripted into the armed forces). Often these new family structures placed additional burdens on women and meant that they had to forgo their own education/training. At the same time the civil war resulted in increased sexual and physical violence against women. This study highlighted the need to invest in human development and capital post-conflict, especially in respect of women's skills and education, due to the fact that they were likely to have missed or lost opportunity for this during conflicts (Baden, 1997).

Even with training and education, it was reported that there is widespread systematic discrimination against refugee women in the labour market, which makes them more vulnerable to physical attacks and/or sexual exploitation in exchange for securing basic needs and protection (UNHCR, 2016). A content analysis of 856 news items samples from Turkish local and national daily news outlets in the period January 2013-December 2015, identified 13 categories of gender-based problems for Syrian women refugees. These problems included experiencing forms of violence, sexual abuse, forced and early marriage and forced prostitution (Narli, Ozascilar & Ipek, 2020).

Theoretical basis of empowerment and education

With the continuing Syrian crisis there are large numbers of refugees, especially women, who are looking for a way to start their new lives in countries of asylum and safety. There is a need to explore how to most effectively empower Syrian refugee women, especially in terms of the provision of education. Women's education is an important issue because of its role in the economic and social empowerment of women as a partner in nation-building and progress (Bayeh, 2016). Formal government interventions have previously led to improvements in women's education and improvements at the personal and family level (United National Population Fund, 1994).

Freire (2000) argued that education should be reconceptualized as an opportunity for agency, autonomy and action, and we agree with this

premise. Syrian refugee women await a pedagogy of hope, one that addresses issues of education, development and liberation (Smith, 1997; 2002). The background to the educational experiences of Syrian refugee women may well echo those of the Latin American populations found in the work of Freire who were oppressed, subjected to authoritarian regimes and had lacked democracy and agency (Torres, 2004). In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire also speaks to empowerment in his writings on education for development and noted that this should 'provide students with the necessary instruments to resist the deracinating powers of an industrial civilization' (in this case the deracinating powers of the war), and should be an 'education that makes it possible for people to fearlessly discuss their problems', and that this may make this discussion and expression 'susceptible to a kind of rebelliousness' (given that the sample of Syrian refugee women will have suffered oppression of many forms during the past decade. Through such expression Freire is reported to have advocated freedom could be achieved (Gadotti & Torres, 2009). We will examine these theoretical themes in our research and use the themes and frames of Freire to analyse the educational experiences of our sample.

This research will explore what the 'real problems and actual (educational) needs' of Syrian refugee women are, as we believe understanding these issues will lead to empowerment of women (Freire, 2000). Within the context of Freire's theories and philosophies of education, McLaren (1999) has argued that the reality of problems cannot be explored fully without taking into account the "significant historical contexts in which knowledge is produced, engaged, and appropriated" (p. 50). In the sample of Syrian refugee women with whom we worked, we find a population oppressed by war in that they were displaced from their country of origin, oppressed by cultural expectations surrounding women and education. Although there had been laws in Syria regarding equality of opportunity (Shaaban, 1998), these did not always result in optimal conditions for women. For instance, in education literacy rates are reported as 74.2% for women and 91% for men (United Nations Development Programme, 2018) and in employment current figures indicate that only 16.39% of the workforce in Syria are women (World Bank, 2020), and finally adjusting to their country of safety, trying to maintain their sense of self and identity in a country with a different language and culture.

This research will attempt, through its sub-questions, to address many of the issues and problems that Syrian refugee women experience, such as being deprived of education due to differing expectations of the role of women and men in society (UNICEF, 2003; United Nations Population Fund, 2016), the traditional bias in favour of boys' education over girls' (United Nations Population Fund, 2012), early marriage, and the role of culture and traditions in the possibility of empowering women educationally. The economic and financial benefits of education for families and its mediating role in providing education for Syrian refugee women, in addition to providing educational opportunities in the countries of asylum, will also be explored.

Research questions

Main research question

How does increasing educational opportunities in safety asylum countries contribute to the process of empowering Syrian refugee women?

Sub-questions

- 1 What are the issues that Syrian refugee women report have affected their education in the country of asylum/safety?
- 2 What is the effect of the Syrian war on the educational experiences of Syrian refugee women?
- 3 How can NGOs contribute to improve education for Syrian refugee women?
- 4 What do Syrian refugee women think would contribute to their educational empowerment?

Methods

The research explored the research questions using semi-structured interviews with a group of 24 Syrian women refugees. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and recorded using an iPad via video conference application 'Zoom'. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. Interviews were conducted by two female members of the team. The interviews were then transcribed by one of the authors. Transcripts were analysed using grounded theory, informed by Strauss & Corbin (1990). This method of analysis identified categories from the interviews using a method of open coding. This involves reading each transcript and identifying the emergent themes mentioned by the participants in their responses. These themes were then collated and grouped into cognate areas and issues. Once analysed, the emergent themes and analysis were presented to a focus group composed of six Syrian refugee women. The focus group was also conducted by Zoom meeting and recorded on an iPad. The focus group participants were asked to judge whether the emergent themes matched with their experiences and their responses were also recorded and transcribed. Finally, the analysed and collated interviews, and the responses of the user focus group members, were translated in English, again by a member of the research team with advanced English language and Arabic knowledge.

Development of interview schedule

The development of the interview schedule with a structured list of planned questions focused on the following representation of Freire's (2000) theories. The themes generated, informed the question schedule. The framework presented in Fig. 1 was used to ensure that an appropriate range and type of question was asked to cover the range of potential facilitators and oppressors of Syrian refugee women. Questions were developed during a series of Zoom meetings with the whole team. Here theoretical perspectives, personal experiences and methodological and ethical considerations were discussed. This required significant reflexivity amongst the team to ensure their own experiences as Syrian refugees were used as a strength and did not inhibit the breadth and scope of the questions that were asked. In this respect the development of a theoretical lens was essential to allow the team to optimize their planning in this respect.

Interview schedule

The questions were developed through the process outlined above. Below the questions that formed the basis of the interview are listed, underneath the research question that they were designed to answer (obviously the actual research questions were not asked of the interviewees). The questions asked were as follows:

Questions on demographic background

Age; Ethnic background; Location of origin; Length of time of Turkey; Occupation before the war.

RQ1-What are the issues that Syrian refugee women report as having affected their education in the country of asylum/safety?

- How has moving to country with a different language affected your access to educational opportunities?
- How has the move of country influenced the continuity and progression of your educational experiences?
- Have you had any experience of trying to access funding in respect of your education?
- What things have affected your opportunity to access education? Choose one or more answers as you see fit?

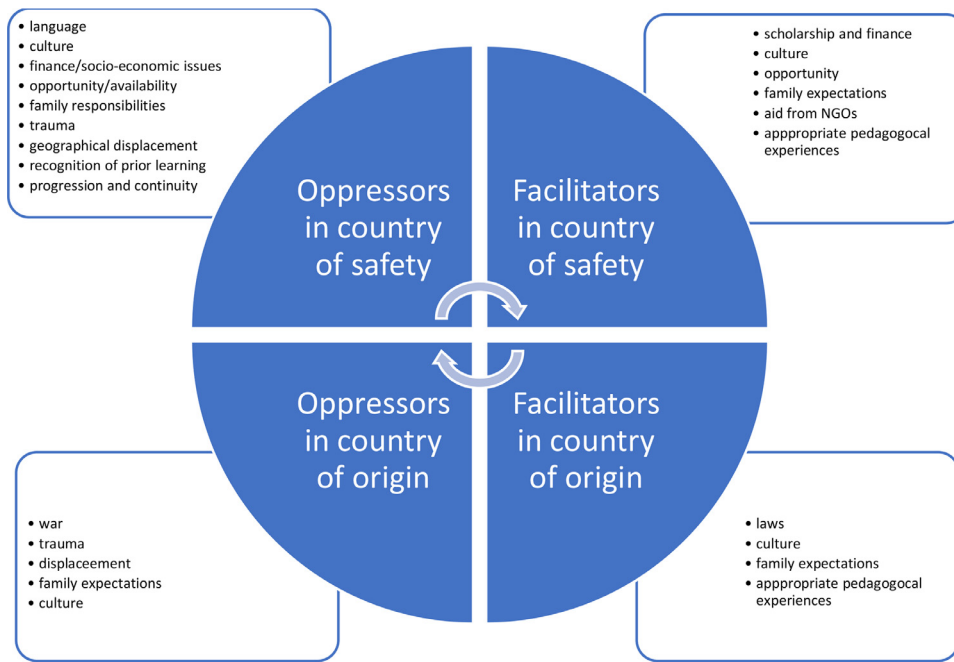


Fig. 1. Facilitators and oppressors of education for Syrian refugee women.

RQ2-What is the effect of the Syrian war on the educational experiences of Syrian refugee women?

- What do you think the impact of the Syrian crisis has been on the economic situation of Syrian women?
- What do you think the impact of the Syrian crisis on the social situation of Syrian women?
- What do you think the impact of the Syrian crisis on the educational opportunities for women?
- Is the crisis to consider that the war in Syria pushed Syrian women to drop out of education?
- what is the impact of the crisis on changing customs and tradition in relation to women's education?

RQ3-How can NGOs contribute to improving education for Syrian refugee women?

- Are you aware of any projects run by NGOs that aim to empower Syrian refugee women?
- How could existing projects be changed to ensure that your educational needs are catered for?
- Were you consulted by any NGOs about projects aimed at improving educational provision for women?
- What do you think is the focus of NGOs in their provision for Syrian refugee women? How do you think that this provision could be improved?

RQ4-What do Syrian refugee women think would contribute to their educational empowerment?

- Do changing culture and traditions on issues related to the educational empowerment of women contributes to increasing their opportunities in education?
- Do you have experience of the Turkish government in providing educational scholarships and have these contributed to increasing learning opportunities for Syrian women?
- Has the opening of educational programs in Turkish universities in the Arabic language contributed to increasing educational opportunities for Syrian refugee women?

- How do you think that changing the social ideas held by the Syrian family or society influence the educational empowerment of women?
- What additional issues do Syrian refugee women see that contribute affect their educational empowerment?

Sample

Recruitment: The issues of educational needs and provision were explored by working with a group of Syrian refugee women in Mardin State. This state was chosen for its easy access and because it is located in southern Turkey, where the largest number of Syrian refugees are concentrated. The Turkish government has also opened a department for teaching in the Arabic language at Mardin University. The sample was recruited by sending emails with information sheets, and consent sheets through contacts within Mardin State. Potential participants were asked to contact us if they were interested in taking part in the study.

Demographics of sample: The sample was composed of 24 interviewees with a mean age 27.66 years (standard deviation 7.34 years). The ethnicity of the women comprised 17 Arabs, six Kurds and one Turkmen. The geographical distribution of the Syrian cities from which the research sample is displaced from is presented in Fig. 2. It is evident that there is a widespread geographically within Syria, and the main geographic centers and cultures are represented within the sample. The average time since displacement from city of origin was 6.5 years (range 2-9 years). In terms of previous employment before displacement/asylum, and their current work, most of the sample members had not worked in the past and reported that this was the result of Syrian culture that did not focus on women's work opportunities, emphasising instead their role within the family. As for working in countries of asylum/safety, most of the sample members were currently studying in Turkish universities, meaning that they had acquiesced to their new influences of culture.

Ethics

Ethical permission was granted for this study (reference number 157-1920) from the School of Social Science, Education & Social Work Research Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. It was sponsored by a mentor to the researchers based in Turkey and presented to

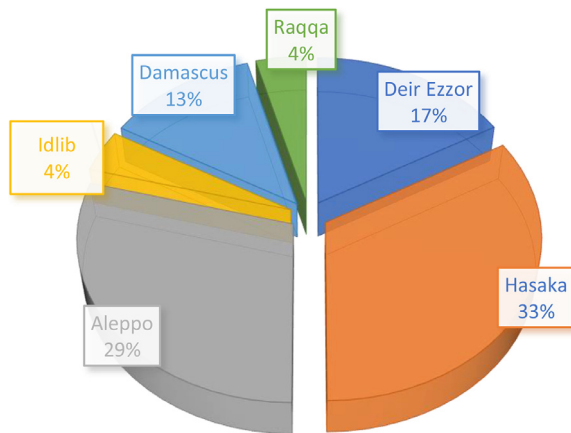


Fig. 2. Geographical distribution of Syrian cities of origin for refugees.

this committee as part of the Council for At Risk Academics CARA Syria Programme.

Results

After coding as described in the methodological section of this manuscript, themes have been arranged and presented in the order of the research sub-questions.

Education in country of asylum/safety

Language

Participants reported that the most prominent issues that affected the educational opportunities of Syrian refugees were primarily economic factors such as the provision of financial support. They also reported that opportunities to undertake Turkish language learning educational opportunities was essential to their successful engagement in education whilst in the country of safety/asylum. Participants reported instability in trying to adapt to learning the Turkish language and integrating into the new educational systems. About one third of the interviewees (34%), noted that language was considered to be the biggest obstacle to any social/educational integration process during communication with people in the host community in Turkey. Interviewees reported positively regarding the possibility of joining Turkish universities, especially when the language of instruction in universities was Arabic. They reported that the Turkish government provided two universities, namely the University of Gaziantep and the University of Mardin, who offer teaching in the Arabic language.

These issues were highlighted by participants who said:

Par11: "What the Syrian refugees in Turkey suffered most was their inability to communicate linguistically with Turkish citizens."

Par2: "The Syrian refugee's lack of knowledge of the Turkish language was causing her weakness in the process of good communication with the Turkish people, especially in social life."

However, despite some negative experiences, some of the participants asserted that the transition process had a positive impact, as it provided an opportunity to obtain education in Turkish schools and universities.

Par3: "There is an impact of the process of moving to Turkey, where some refugee women were allowed to complete their education that they were unable to complete in Syria."

Access to education

The sample was composed of a number of Syrian refugee women from the eastern regions of Syria who had social customs that did not

focus heavily on the importance of female education. Upon moving to Turkey, there were opportunities to join education centers in order to raise their level of education. This impacted on their cultural norms and the relatively well-developed educational system in Turkey meant that about one in five of the interviewees felt that their access to quality education had improved.

Par4: "When refugees were able to learn Turkish, they were able to increase their educational skills and skills, and were able to enrol in universities and educational centres."

Par11: "The opening of education programs in the Arabic language in Turkish universities and the open age requirement made most of the refugees think about joining universities, and this is what has pushed many refugee women to complete their education."

However, about one in ten participants reported that lack of comprehensive financial support to those entering education was a barrier to access. This was illustrated by one participant who said:

Par1: "All organizations must work to provide an economic resource for women to help them complete their education, because most women have become without a breadwinner."

Improved access to education was experienced when there were formal educational opportunities to learn the Turkish language:

Par1: "Syrian refugee women can learn quickly and easily through many organizations providing continuous learning centers to teach the Turkish language and that are primarily directed to women."

Funding for education

Many of the women reported that there are challenges in obtaining the necessary funding to continue pursuing their education. Unless they are financially independent or have a professional occupation, it is difficult for Syrian refugee women to obtain financial support to help them with their education. This was highlighted by participants who said:

Par21: "Most of the Syrian refugees leave education in order to work in order to secure the necessities of life, and this is why many of them are not educated."

Par5 "The main factor affecting refugee education is the economic situation and providing the necessary returns for this process."

The impact of war on education

Participants reported that the war in Syria has greatly affected them. Many had their family units disrupted and that their husbands were no longer part of the family (an increase in the percentage of women whose husbands had been killed, recruited to the military, or were lost). The woman also assumed responsibility for the household in the event that he was incapacitated due to the circumstances of war, his inability to work or because he was missing. In some cases this has pushed women to leave education and search for a source of income in order to secure their needs.

Par5: "The instability of financial returns due to the absence of a specific job and the lack of guarantees for the continuation of work has led many refugees not to think about completing their education, whether they are men or women."

Par10: "But there are many women because of the financial situation who did not complete their education."

One in five of the interviewees reported that they felt a consequence of the war had been long term economic instability for them resulting in loss of property, savings and experience of poverty. This was another driving factor in choosing work over education.

It should also be noted that war and asylum have pushed women to increase their skills and gain scientific and practical experiences in order to obtain adequate income in light of the high cost of living for the

family. This has prompted a change of customs, culture and traditions around women's education in Syrian refugee society.

Par10: "There are many women who were able to complete their education after coming to Turkey."

The reported increases in being widowed and the increase in separation (divorce) is also a feature of refugee women's lives. Women reported that this forced them to develop financial independence from men. There is an increase in divorce cases after becoming a refugee because of issues such as early marriage, quarrels between husband and wife, a woman's sense that she has become stronger than a man as a result of the work she does. One clear impact of the war in Syria on the social status of Syrian women is that it made them self-reliant, and able to rely on themselves to provide financially for their own families.

Par14: "That war drove women to become men in an economic sense."

As for the impact of the Syrian crisis on educational opportunities for Syrian refugee women, this is a complex situation. More than 60% of the sample indicated that educational opportunities for women became better after the asylum process in Turkey.

Par8: "Some women, including myself, were able to wipe out our educational illiteracy and enrol in universities in order to obtain the diploma and thus work that deserves women, but there are some women who were driven by war circumstances to leave education and help their husbands."

There are customs which prohibit or discourage sending girls to education centers. One in five participants reported this sort of attitude. However, the changing role of women in their country of safety/asylum meant that this attitude was changing.

Par8: "Women in light of the war in Syria became the breadwinner, and thus society encourages women's education in order to obtain greater opportunities."

Par16 "Many families encourage their daughters to go to educational centers in order to obtain the Red Crescent scholarships."

Par1: "There are many customs, such as preference for males over females, or excessive fear for women to go to far places to complete their education, which were present in Syrian society. Through training workshops, organizations were able to remove these habits and open the horizon around Women's education."

The role of NGOs on promoting educational opportunity

NGOs have a great role in contributing to the educational empowerment of Syrian women. With regard to the Syrian refugee women's knowledge of projects run by non-governmental organizations that aim to empower Syrian refugee women, most of the sample members said that they had no knowledge of the projects undertaken by NGOs that aimed at the educational empowerment of Syrian women, except projects that focused on teaching the basics of the Turkish language, support for Sharia sciences, and some professional and technical lessons.

Par13: "Most of the organizations' work is food support and some courses in language fields or some technical fields."

The interviewees almost unanimously (nine out of ten) reported that they had never been consulted about provision or service by NGOs and that they could improve provision by involving refugee women as user advisors. Whilst current provision focused on aid and provision of language courses, participants expressed a wish for wider provision of educational opportunities.

Par21: "In order to increase the effectiveness of the work of organizations, there must be professional courses such as teaching sewing, hairdressing, and some work that women depend on to bring money."

Promoting empowerment of women

On the subject of what Syrian refugee women thought would contribute to their educational empowerment, we found that Syrian refugee women focused on their educational empowerment to change the customs and traditions that were preventing women from educational opportunities. They felt that governmental and NGOs have a great role to play in this process through raising awareness or opening of specialized educational centers, and the provision of financial resources that could help women maximise their educational potential.

Poverty is still an issue reported by four in five refugees to prevent empowerment. This is what was expressed by one of the participants:

Par18: "There are many families who suffer from very poor economic and social conditions."

The overwhelming majority (nine out of ten) of participants reported that opening educational programs in Turkish universities in the Arabic language to increasing educational opportunities for Syrian refugee women was empowering.

Par8: "Without the presence of Arab departments in Turkish universities, I would not have been able to complete my education and many Syrian refugee women are in exactly the same situation as me."

The war has brought about changing social norms for women. Nine in ten participants said that customs and traditions no longer significantly adversely affected the educational empowerment of women. Rather, economic factors have become the main driver of any educational empowerment process for women.

Focus group analysis

After the initial coding of interviews had been completed, a user focus group was established. This was composed of six Syrian refugee women. The coded results were presented to them in order to triangulate interpretation and findings with the views of these participants. Themes are presented in the same order as the research s-questions presented earlier in this manuscript.

Education in country of safety/asylum

Language issues

Interviewees considered that lack of opportunity to learn the Turkish language was considered one of the main obstacles in the process of social integration and access to education. These sentiments were confirmed by the focus group members.

(FGM4) "Indeed, the lack of learning the Turkish language was a barrier to accessing education, whether at university or postgraduate levels."

(FGM3) "Failure to learn the Turkish language is considered an obstacle to communication and social integration."

(FGM1) "Many centres have established Free Turkish language courses, but the level of these courses was very poor, and for Syrian refugee women who want to complete their education, they must enrol in language courses that have high financial costs, and many Syrian refugee women cannot afford these costs. The Arab universities at the universities of Gaziantep and Mardin have made progress in overcoming the language barrier and has made studying easy for Syrian refugee women."

(FGM2), "The provision of studies in Arabic at the universities of Gaziantep and Mardin Irglo contributed to increasing educational opportunities for Syrian refugee women who do not master the Turkish language and have ambitions to complete her studies."

Interviewees reported an increase in divorce, widowhood, and being single, which had an impact on the social status of Syrian women,

and concomitantly made them dependant on themselves, able to secure income for their families. The focus group agreed with this analysis.

(FGM1) "The war has pushed women to depend on themselves in many cases, the most important of which is the high cost of living or the loss of breadwinner due to divorce or death."

(FGM4) "The war has increased the cases of women's self-reliance, especially in the absence of a breadwinner and in case they are It is responsible for children or a family and it is the only one able to meet their needs."

Interviewees reported that the war resulted in changes to customs, culture and traditions around the education of women, which led them to increase their skills and gain scientific and practical experiences to obtain sufficient income. This was echoed in the comments of members of the focus group.

(FGM3): "The conditions of war forced us as refugee women to change these customs, traditions and mentality that existed previously, and to increase our culture and education."

(FGM5): There were many negative customs present in our societies before asylum. That changed for the better due to the fact that parents moved to places of refuge that had different ideas, different opinions, and a different culture, and this increased the chances of women obtaining their rights and knowing their duties. Consequently, we find that the war led to a change in customs, social culture and traditions that were limiting the possibility of women obtaining their education or increasing their scientific skills."

Focus groups went further. They noted that if funding issues could be overcome, then these changes could result in long terms positive benefits for Syrian refugee women.

(FGM3) "Many customs and traditions have changed, but are no longer negatively influencing the process of empowering Syrian refugee women as much as the provision of financial support for women until they complete their education."

(FGM6) "If the Syrian refugee woman is able to secure an income that covers the requirements of life, she will be able to complete her education and thus the economic factor is considered as the basic and important variable in the process of empowering refugee women."

(FGM1): "The impact of moving to asylum countries through contact with the surrounding community pushed to change social customs, which made many families send women to education centres, especially for those who were suffering from negative conditions or had special conditions such as widows and divorced women, there is no longer any objection to going to educational centres."

Funding for education

A common theme of the interviews was that women were focused on searching for a source to provide financial income that helps in providing the basic requirements of life. This prompted many who were studying in Syrian universities or who wanted to complete their education to postpone the idea of completing studies in light of the difficult economic conditions for refugees. One of the focus group participants had been an economist in Syria during the war and stated:

(FGM1)"There were students studying in Syrian universities who were forced to work and drop out of education at the beginning of their refuge in Turkey, which led to the difficulty of completing education for Syrian refugee women."

Other participants described similar situations.

(FGM4) "When we came to Turkey, we had no income, and therefore education was not a priority. Therefore, I postponed the issue

of education for two years because I could not obtain any financial support or any educational grant."

(FGM2), "The economic factor had a great impact on completing education for Syrian refugee women, as they were forced to work to secure income for themselves and their families, which led to postponing the completion of their education, and some of them even cancelled the idea of permanently completing their education."

Interviewees noted that a woman's inability to obtain the necessary funding to complete her education was a hindrance to accessing educational opportunities, and this was confirmed by the focus group.

(FGM3) "Most of the Syrian refugee women are responsible for families, and they seek to provide income for them and their families. Therefore, they postponed the idea of completing their education for a year or two and three years."

(FGM4) "The support provided by NGOs focuses on basic needs."

(FGM1) "The language barrier was a reason for the inability to obtain a job opportunity."

(FGM5) "There is a woman with experience in the crochet and wool industry who worked with a group of women and developed their skills and were able to provide the appropriate income, which enabled this woman to complete her education with her children."

(FGM1) "If I have a profession and work long hours, when will I be able to complete my education."

The impact of war on education

A finding of the interviews was that the war in Syria had an effect of favouring job opportunities over educational opportunities as a result of the loss of property, savings, and economic stability. The focus group members were in agreement with this finding.

(FGM1) "When a job opportunity becomes available for a Syrian refugee, she will favour the opportunity for education."

(FGM2) "The goal was to secure a livelihood, and to survive hunger away from the cold, and there is no room for thinking about education, whether for females or males."

Another finding of the interviews was that the responsibilities of the Syrian refugee woman have increased in comparison to her responsibilities before the war, especially in the event of losing the breadwinner. Again this finding was confirmed by the focus group participants.

(FGM2) "The loss of a breadwinner, such as a husband or father, had a great impact on the woman's education, as she was forced to enter the labour market to secure life's requirements, which made her give up education."

(FGM3) "The Syrian refugee woman was forced to work in addition to her husband's work to provide a life within economic conditions Suitable."

(FGM4)" Syrian women have been affected psychologically, and sometimes feeling helpless, and unable to act, so how can she think about continuing her education."

The role of NGOs in promoting educational opportunities

On the role of NGOs working in the Syrian war the focus group was in broad agreement that there needed to be more involvement with refugee groups in strategic planning.

(FGM4) "If NGOs conducted research and consulted the target group and understood the needs of women, they would build programs that empower women educationally."

(FGM5) "If the organizations studied, they would yield better results for women's empowerment."

The focus group also made a number of observations in addition to those raised by the interviewees. These included some issues surrounding the uneven distribution of projects and aid.

(FGM2) "NGOs focused on food support, clothing, psychological support, professions and language."

(FGM1) "NGOs contributed to providing simple financial support, and the support in Gaziantep was greater than the support in Mardin State, and the organizations focused on food support more than supporting education."

Whilst there was some support for the role of Civil Societies in helping break down barriers to education for women, the focus group still felt that, in general, the educational empowerment of Syrian refugee women was very weak.

(FGM3): "When community organizations were conducting awareness sessions for women, there was special guidance on the issue of educational empowerment for women, as these courses emphasized that a woman's weapon in these circumstances is her education and knowledge that she possesses. Through it she can face any difficulties."

(FGM6): "The organizations have changed the thinking of the Syrian society about many customs, especially many customs such as early marriage and women's education, but the role of these organizations was not sufficient in the field of educational empowerment for women, rather their primary role was primarily food relief."

The focus group noted that NGOs could become more effective in supporting the empowerment of women through the establishment of professional courses such as teaching sewing, beauty salons, hairdressing and some work that women rely on to provide financial income, which contributes to increasing educational empowerment opportunities for Syrian refugee women.

(FGM1) "These projects are beneficial to women and enable them to provide a job opportunity, which helps them educate their children."

Interviewees broadly reported that moving to Turkey facilitated a broadening of educational opportunity for some refugees, that had been lacking during the war. The focus group agreed with this reporting:

(FGM2): "The procedures and facilities provided by the Turkish government to the Syrian refugees increased the educational empowerment opportunities for Syrian refugee women."

(FGM4): "The process of transferring Syrian refugee women to Turkey and because of the sufficient time for Syrian refugee women in light of the busy family working outside the home now has enough time for her to complete her education."

Indeed the more liberal society in Turkey, with a greater emphasis on educational equality between the sexes, could be empowering for future generations of Syrian women.

(FGM1): "Most of the women who were suffering from special conditions were able to complete their education in light of changing the prevailing customs in society."

(FGM3): "Changing social norms helped Syrian refugee women who suffer from special conditions to become self-reliant and enter the labour market and the possibility of completing educational opportunities in universities."

Discussion

The comments from participants and the focus group on language barriers and language education echo those previously reported in the

literature. [Kek and Huijser \(2011\)](#) reported that women from refugee backgrounds are particularly vulnerable and faced cultural and linguistic barriers in accessing educational opportunities. This prompted many of the interviewee women to learn the Turkish language in various ways in order to facilitate communication with members of the host community. [Leslie \(2011\)](#) indicated that refugee women have a need to learn the language of the resettlement country, to be successful in adapting to social and cultural norms and establish relationships. The issue of language is previously reported by [Watkins et al. \(2012\)](#), which showed that there is difficulty in mastering the English language and communication, and this is the most significant issue that affected the well-being of Karen refugees in Australia. This shows a repeated experience of refugees across the world, finding safety in different countries and struggling to get educated in different languages. It indicates that high quality language education should be a priority for receiving governments, NGOs and refugees as it is one of the most pronounced barriers affecting the education of women in country of safety/asylum.

Financial issues were reported to be a very significant issues affecting education by interviewees and focus group members. This result was similar to one reported by [Jayaweera \(2010\)](#), which emphasized that social and economic structures restrict the role of education as a factor in empowering women. This finding is also in line with data reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ([UNHCR, 2016](#)) which concluded that refugees felt they had limited opportunities to earn a living, that there was scarcity of educational opportunities, insecurity and the absence of financial security provided by the husband's income. There was also a negative impact of low finances to support language learning, especially if there were children or the woman was the breadwinner for the family. This would make it difficult for her to enter full-time education. In many instances, the women in our study found themselves with a changed financial role. [Baden \(1997\)](#) has previously reported increases in the number of female-headed households, and the presence of children orphans as a result of displacement, loss of parents, or kidnapping/ recruitment into the armed forces within refugee populations. This presented a potential barrier to the refugees realising their educational potential in the country of safety/asylum. In a study that interviewed 16 Syrian refugees in Turkey, unfavourable working conditions, with long hours and low pay were reported by the sample ([Safak-Ayvazoglu, Kunuroglu & Yagmur, 2021](#)).

Formal education was reported to play an important role in helping refugees. This finding is also in line with those reported by [Leslie \(2011\)](#). Leslie reported that participation in formal education assisted Sudanese refugees in the resettlement process by meeting many needs. The formal education provided the Sudanese refugee women with the linguistic and professional skills, in addition to the feeling of empowerment and effectiveness needed for them to redefine their lives and advocate for social change. Bearing in mind that the education system in Turkey and its flexibility in providing the opportunity to learn without having maximum age bars, gave refugee women an opportunity to complete their education.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR, 2016](#)) reported that systematic discrimination against Syrian refugee women in the labour market makes them vulnerable to physical abuse and sexual exploitation in exchange for basic needs and protection. Therefore, our findings provide essential advice on how to address the educational needs to Syrian refugee women to counteract the 'Apparatus' of oppression. Interviewees reported loss of possessions, wealth and dual income with their partner as a direct consequence of the war. This meant that they were maybe having to prioritise work over education as a direct consequence of the war.

NGOs have a very significant role to play in provision of education to women. Previous studies (e.g. [Aras & Yasun, 2016](#); [Cohen, 2008](#)) noted that vocational and technical courses and small projects that can be a source of income for refugee women, and helps in the financial and economic stability of these women. However, matching the needs of refugee women with the provision of NGOs still requires some thought. Many of

the interviews and focus group members reported a mismatch in this respect. Such mismatches between refugee need, and NGO delivery have been previously reported (e.g. Al-Samalouti, 2007). Al-Dulaimi (2005) pointed out in his study the importance of spreading the culture of gender and introducing concepts of empowerment and sustainable development for women in Bahrain who face a set of challenges and obstacles. It is possible to design bespoke educational programmes to meet the needs of Syrian refugees. Abdullateef, Parkinson and Sarmini (2020) provide a powerful example of agricultural education for Syrian refugees in this respect. Empowerment is not just an issue of gender. Minority groups such as disabled refugees also need to be empowered by NGOs to address issues such as mobility in refugee camps (Abdulkarim, Albari & MacKenzie, 2021).

The insights and scrutiny provided by the focus group enabled us to cross-check our interpretation of the interview data. This was especially important as the team of researchers working on this and analysing the data, were all refugees from Syria. The independent scrutiny by the focus group was essential in our reflexivity on the research processes. Our experiences as refugee academics gave us access to samples, and access to authentic data collection opportunities, but also brought with it the risk that our own experiences may influence our interpretation of data. The focus group provided important scrutiny in our research process.

Limitations of the work

The work reported has some obvious limitations. The first is generalisability. Findings cannot be generalised to the 1.7 million Syrian refugee women in Turkey. The sample size was limited by funding available, but also as this work was conducted against the backdrop of the Covid 19 pandemic. This made recruitment and retention of the sample more challenging. Whilst the 24 interviews are generally considered acceptable for saturation of themes within a sub-sample to extrapolate these findings across all 12 states in southern Turkey where Syrian refugee women are population would not be credible. The work was conducted by Syrian refugee academics. This meant that normal access to library facilities was limited for the research team and the work would not have been possible without the financial support of CARA to purchase equipment. Ordinarily a mentor/mentee relationship through CARA is preceded by a three-day methods and theory workshop, face-to-face. However, again due to Covid 19 issues, this was not possible. This meant that this relationship between the Syrian refugee academics and the UK based mentor, had to be grown and sustained via videoconferencing, a new experience for us all.

Conclusion

It is evident from the responses of the sample members that there are two main issues. The first is that changing the social ideas of society will lead to an increase in educational empowerment opportunities for women. Second, the organizations were able to change social customs through awareness-raising and education sessions, and this led to an increase in opportunities for Syrian refugees to enter universities and scientific centers. Participants also emphasized that providing financial support to refugee women and providing centers specialized in women's professions will lead to increased empowerment opportunities for the education of Syrian refugee women.

The theoretical framing derived from Freire (2000) of oppressors and facilitators of empowerment revealed a number of confirmatory and contradictory patterns. Refugees may be best served by working to co-construct culturally relevant pedagogical experiences with NGOs and may be the most facilitative way to plan curriculum and create educational opportunities. This would need to take account of culture and language that the refugees bring, including the need to address some of the oppressive cultural and social constraints that have followed the refugees from Syria. Nevertheless, the changing role of women calls

for innovative curriculum that prepares them for work, business, entrepreneurship and higher education, and would represent the emergence of a culturally responsive pedagogy of and for the oppressed with respect to Syrian refugee women. As the women have demonstrated here, given the educational opportunity, they have the power to begin challenging oppressive male-dominated norms and practices.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

None

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