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Syrian Refugee Women's Experiences with Intimate Partner Violence During Pre-War, Displacement, and Asylum Period in Türkiye*

Mawahib K. M. Hassan**

Abstract

This study examines Syrian married refugee women's experiences with intimate partner violence (IPV) across three periods: the pre-war period in Syria, the period of war and internal displacement, and the asylum-seeking phase in Türkiye. It explores how changing social contexts and structural conditions shape IPV within forced migration settings. A qualitative design was used, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 Syrian women in Ankara. Thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's framework, and MAXQDA were used during data interpretation. The findings indicate that IPV was present across all phases of displacement, with the highest levels reported in pre-war Syria and displacement largely shaped by patriarchal norms and unequal gender dynamics. However, IPV declined in the asylum period, coinciding with shifts in women's awareness, access to support systems, and changes in social environments. The study underscores the lasting influence of gendered power relations and highlights the need for targeted and context-sensitive interventions.

Keywords : Intimate Partner Violence, Syrian Refugee Women, Displacement, Patriarchy, Asylum

Savaş Öncesi Dönemde, Yerinden Edilme Sürecinde ve Türkiye'ye Sığınma Dönemlerinde Suriyeli Sığınmacı Kadınların Yakın Partner Şiddeti Deneyimleri

Özet

Bu çalışma, Suriyeli mülteci kadınların yakın partner şiddeti deneyimlerini üç dönemde incelemektedir: savaş öncesi dönem, savaş ve ülke içi yerinden edilme dönemi ile Türkiye'deki sığınma dönemi. Makalede zorunlu göç bağlamında değişen toplumsal yapıların ve yapısal koşulların yakın partner şiddetini nasıl etkilediği araştırılmıştır. Nitel araştırma deseniyle yürütülen çalışmada, Ankara'da yaşayan 20 Suriyeli kadınla yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Veriler, Braun ve Clarke'ın tematik analiz yöntemiyle ve MAXQDA desteğiyle analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, yakın partner şiddetinin her dönemde görüldüğünü, ancak savaş öncesi dönemde ve yerinden edilme sürecinde ataerkil normlar ve eşit olmayan toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkiler nedeniyle daha yoğun yaşandığını ortaya koymuştur. Ancak, sığınma döneminde yakın partner şiddetinde azalma gözlemlenmiştir; bu durum, kadınların farkındalığındaki artış, destek sistemlerine erişim imkânlarının gelişmesi ve sosyal çevredeki değişimlerle ilişkilidir. Çalışma, toplumsal cinsiyet temelli güç ilişkilerinin etkisini ve bağlamsal müdahale gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : Yakın Partner Şiddeti, Suriyeli Mülteci Kadınlar, Yerinden Edilme, Ataerkillik, Sığınma

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Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive global issue affecting women across diverse societies. It is defined as any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors (WHO, n.d.). IPV affects individuals across all socioeconomic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. However, women disproportionately bear the global burden of IPV (WHO, 2012, p. 1). This study focuses on violence within heterosexual marital relations, focusing on violence perpetrated by husbands against their wives as a form of gender-based violence.

IPV functions as a tool of social control, reinforced by systems of power and oppression related to gender (Bograd, 1999). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 35% of women worldwide experience physical or sexual IPV in their lifetime, and 30% of partnered women report abuse from their intimate partners (WHO, 2018). Disturbingly, 38% of all female homicides are perpetrated by male partners, highlighting the lethal consequences of unchecked IPV (WHO, 2005). Although IPV is a global concern, its prevalence varies significantly by region, with the Middle East exhibiting notably high rates (Al-Modallal, 2015). WHO further reports that the Eastern Mediterranean region bears the highest regional burden, with 37% of women having experienced physical and/or sexual IPV at some point in their lives (WHO, 2013, p. 27).

IPV is a widespread and persistent problem in Syria, with high rates documented across the country. A national survey conducted in 2010 by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the General Family Affairs Commission, involving 5000 women over the age of 18 from diverse regions, reported that 25% of participants had encountered psychological, physical, and sexual violence within the family context. Physical abuse was especially prominent, with one in every three women reporting exposure to such violence (Zaman Al Wasal, 2010). Reports from UNFPA and local organizations continue to highlight the widespread occurrence of IPV in Syria. Multiple factors contribute, including family laws and the patriarchal structure of society. The Personal Status Law also reinforces male authority over women and confines women's roles largely to domestic duties. As Mousa (2018) notes, Syrian laws are rooted in the principle that "the man is the head of the family," entrenching patriarchal norms (Mousa, 2018, p. 1). Legal provisions designate men as family guardians (Article 21/1) and require women to obtain their guardian's consent for marriage (Article 21/2). Other articles prohibit women from working outside the home without their husband's permission (Article 73/6; Syria News, 2019). Moreover, Syrian criminal law does not explicitly criminalize violence against women within marriage, and marital rape is neither defined nor prosecuted, with rape recognized only outside of marriage (Mousa, 2016).

In addition to legal frameworks, cultural values and social expectations in Syria reinforce patriarchal authority and contribute to the normalization of IPV. Male dominance is embedded in the fabric of Syrian society and is normalized and reinforced through cultural and social norms (Syrians for Truth and Justice, 2021). Multiple societal dynamics support and sustain this violence, rendering it an accepted norm. Cultural values that portray women as inherently subordinate or dependent on men for protection further embed this issue. Compounding the problem is the widespread societal minimization of IPV as a serious concern. Many women conceal abuse, often perceiving it as a private family issue unfit for public discussion. Additionally, some women rationalize their partners' violent behavior as a reaction to economic hardship. Low educational attainment and limited awareness of legal rights further increase women's susceptibility to abuse. Social stigma and fears of blame, retaliation, divorce, or loss of child custody further silence women and prevent them from seeking help (Al-Shdayfat & Hatamleh, 2017).

The outbreak of war in 2011 further exacerbated IPV; as displacement, economic collapse, and the disintegration of social support systems intensified women's vulnerability (Freedman, 2016). These contextual shifts highlight the importance of exploring how Syrian refugee women experienced IPV during three periods: the pre-war period, the period of war and displacement, and the asylum-seeking phase[1] in Türkiye. These periods were chosen to understand how the structural framework of patriarchal societies contributes to women's exposure to violence, and to explore the negative consequences of internal conflicts, the collapse of social systems, widespread violence, and cross-border displacement in search of safety on incidents of IPV. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the evolving nature of IPV in these distinct contexts and to understand how patriarchal norms have shaped women's vulnerability across different stages of crisis and displacement.

The primary research questions guiding this study are as follows: What forms of IPV do Syrian refugee women experience? In what ways does the patriarchal structure of society contribute to their vulnerability? And how have the manifestations of violence changed during the war and the asylum period in Türkiye?

While previous studies have examined IPV among Syrian refugee[2] women in war

[1] The asylum-seeking phase in Türkiye refers to the time during which individuals fleeing conflict, violence, or persecution can apply for asylum. This includes Syrians under temporary protection as well as people from other nationalities seeking international protection. Although Türkiye maintains a geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention, it provides protection and asylum procedures for non-European refugees, often with the goal of facilitating resettlement in third countries (UNHCR, n.d.).

[2] In Türkiye, Syrian migrants are not granted formal refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention due to the country's geographical limitation but are instead protected under the Temporary Protection Regulation of 2014. This legal framework, established through the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No: 6458), ensures access to basic rights and services while safeguarding against forced return. Although Syrian refugees do not hold formal refugee status under Turkish law, this study uses the term "refugee" to refer to Syrians in Türkiye, based on their social and living conditions.

zones, few have employed a longitudinal perspective that captures women's experiences before, during, and after displacement. Using a feminist theoretical lens, this study offers new empirical insights into how patriarchal structures and gendered power imbalances shape women's vulnerability to IPV across these critical periods.

Theoretical Background

To explain Syrian refugee women's experiences of IPV, the study draws on feminist theory, which argues that the root cause of violence against women lies in unequal power relations that privilege men over women. These power imbalances extend to marital relationships, where men are often granted authority, and women are expected to be subordinate. As Walker (1979) argues, IPV is a natural consequence of the systemic oppression of women by men. Such unequal gender relations are deeply embedded in the patriarchal societal structures, where men hold greater authority and social privilege while women are relegated to secondary roles. In such systems, men are often seen as the heads of family and are given control and decision-making power. This patriarchal dominance is reinforced through socialization, customs, and social norms, all of which play a significant role in perpetuating IPV (Walby, 1990, as cited in Haj-Yahia, 2005, p. 5).

Patriarchal societies perpetuate ideologies of male dominance that often normalize, tolerate, or even justify violence against women. Within these systems, a woman's social status is typically defined by her domestic roles; which are largely confined to housework, childcare, and showing obedience and respect toward her husband. When a man perceives that his wife has failed to fulfill these expectations or has disobeyed him, he may respond with IPV (Haj-Yahia, 1998).

Empirical studies have shown that women themselves sometimes internalize these norms, accepting or even justifying acts of violence committed against them. For example, the Turkey Demographic and Health Survey, conducted by the Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies (2019), included 7,346 women aged 15-49 from across Türkiye, including 1,256 Syrian refugee women. The study found that 7% of Syrian women surveyed believed physical violence was justified in situations such as disobedience to the husband, neglect of children or housework, arguing with the husband, leaving the house without permission, questioning him about other women, or refusing sexual relations.

Similarly, a World Health Organization study (2005) involving 2,400 women across 10 countries found that 68% of respondents believed physical violence by a husband was justified under circumstances such as neglecting housework, refusing sex, disobedience, or infidelity. In Zimbabwe, a national survey of women aged 15-59 revealed that 53% of participants justified wife-beating in cases such as neglecting children, arguing with the husband, going out without permission, or refusing sex (Hindin, 2003). In some cultural and religious contexts, such acts of violence are even framed as disciplinary measures

or safeguards of family honor, stemming from the deeply entrenched belief that a wife is the property of her husband and therefore subject to his control (WHO, 2002, p. 95).

In sum, this theoretical perspective offers a useful lens for understanding the gendered power dynamics that shape Syrian refugee women's experiences of IPV. It will also guide the analysis of the interview data in this study. The next section will review previous research on IPV.

Literature Review

Several studies have examined IPV in refugee communities. Notably, El-Moslemany et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review using a critical appraisal methodology to examine previous research on IPV among asylum seekers and refugees. Their analysis of 23 studies revealed that IPV is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. The review found that higher educational attainment among both perpetrators and survivors was associated with lower rates of IPV. Additionally, factors such as relationship dynamics, legal status, and age were identified as significant correlates of IPV within refugee populations (El-Moslemany et al, 2020).

Meanwhile, Cankurtaran and Albayrak (2019) conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 26 Syrian refugee women in Ankara to explore their life experiences before and after the war, and during and after their migration. The study revealed that these women faced multiple forms of violence, not only from their husbands but also from their mothers-in-law. Many women lived in constant fear of their husbands marrying a second wife or divorcing them, which often compelled them to tolerate abuse to remain with their children. The study also documented cases of reproductive coercion, including pressure to bear more children and restrictions on contraceptive use. Cultural norms emphasizing family privacy, combined with language barriers, further discouraged women from seeking help, contributing to the persistence of IPV (Cankurtaran & Albayrak, 2019).

Similarly, Al-Natour et al. (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 Syrian refugee women living in refugee displacement facilities in Jordan to explore their lived experiences with marital violence during the Syrian war and displacement. Their findings identified four main themes: women experienced severe losses and insecurity, endured shame and humiliation from abuse, justified remaining in abusive marriages due to social and familial factors, and developed coping mechanisms such as religious practices, avoidance, and, in some cases, self-harm or aggression toward their children (Al-Natour et al., 2019).

Usta et al. (2016) also examined the experiences of 29 displaced Syrian women living in Lebanon to explore IPV in refugee settings. The study revealed that women faced IPV, harassment, and community violence, often worsened by poor living conditions and

stress. Many women adopted harmful coping strategies, such as justifying IPV or redirecting their frustration toward their children. The authors highlighted the need for culturally sensitive support programs for refugee women.

Finally, Al-Modallal et al. (2015) examined IPV among refugee women residing in Palestinian camps in Jordan, revealing that 78% of the participants experienced at least one form of violence. Among the different types, controlling behavior was the most common, affecting 73.7% of women, followed by economic violence (53%), and emotional violence (50.3%). Physical violence was reported by 22.7% of the participants, while 16.7% disclosed experiencing sexual violence. The relatively lower incidence of reported sexual violence may be attributed to cultural norms that prioritize family privacy and societal pressures that discourage women from speaking out about such experiences (Al-Modallal et al., 2015).

Through the review of literature, it becomes evident that factors such as societal structures, cultural norms, lack of education, and armed conflicts along with social collapse intersect to contribute to the widespread prevalence of IPV. Women are particularly affected at the familial level, experiencing an increase in IPV, while refugee women face unique vulnerabilities, including reproductive coercion, economic dependency, and fear of social stigma, which often prevent them from seeking help or leaving abusive relationships.

Methodology

Study Design

The study investigates Syrian refugee women's experiences with IPV during three periods: the pre-war period, the period of war and displacement, and the period of asylum-seeking in Türkiye. To explore this in depth, it employs a qualitative research method supported by a feminist research approach for data collection. Applying feminist research principles, such as equalizing power between the researcher and participants during data collection, helps reduce hierarchical relationships, build trust, and facilitate the disclosure of participants' experiences, while also recognizing and reflecting on the emotional aspects of women's lives.

During the interviews the researcher employed empowering language to challenge participants' self-blame and reframe their understanding of IPV. Specifically, carefully chosen phrases such as "You are not the only one who has experienced this matter" and "I've heard of this before" were used to achieve two key objectives: 1)alleviating women's tendency to blame themselves for the violence they experienced and 2)reinforcing the notion that IPV stems not from individual failures but from broader patriarchal structures that systematically privilege men over women. This approach aligns with existing literature demonstrating that many women who are exposed to IPV internalize blame, leading

to self-stigmatization and reluctance to disclose abuse (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Gray et al., 2015; Mendis, 2009).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, using a snowball sampling technique to recruit participants. Interviews were conducted with 20 Syrian refugee women between March and May 2021 in three neighborhoods in Ankara, Türkiye: Ulubey (Altındağ district), Baraj (Kuzey Ankara district), and İncirli (Keçiören district). Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Participants were selected based on the following criteria: being Syrian refugee women, being married, and currently residing in Ankara. Interviews were held in participants' homes at times arranged in advance based on their availability. To ensure participants' safety and to uphold confidentiality, interviews were scheduled when husbands were not present, thereby reducing the risk of potential repercussions for participation.

Each interview lasted for approximately 40 to 120 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Arabic by the researcher who is a native Arabic speaker. This shared linguistic and cultural background helped establish a strong sense of trust and connection with participants, which were essential for encouraging disclosure when discussing sensitive topics such as IPV.

Table 1- Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Name	Age	Age at Marriage	Education Status	Women's Work Experience	City of Residence	Age of Husband
Participant1	41	14	Illiterate	None	Aleppo	52
Participant 2	50	14	Secondary school	None	Aleppo	62
Participant 3	30	14	Secondary school	None	Aleppo	45
Participant 4	25	18	Secondary school	None	Idlib	47
Participant 5	36	28	Primary school	None	Aleppo	51
Participant 6	32	17	Primary school	None	Aleppo	45
Participant 7	31	24	Secondary school	None	Aleppo	47
Participant 8	40	20	Primary school	Tailor	Aleppo	50
Participant 9	24	17	Primary school	None	Aleppo	33
Participant 10	33	22	Primary school	None	Aleppo	40
Participant 11	60	16	Illiterate	None	Aleppo	69
Participant 12	43	15	Primary school	None	Aleppo	53
Participant 13	22	16	Primary school	None	Aleppo	35
Participant 14	24	16	Primary school	Hairdresser	Aleppo	33
Participant 15	32	14	Primary school	None	Aleppo	42

Participant 15	33	13	Secondary school	None	Aleppo	47
Participant 16	57	17	Primary school	None	Aleppo	66
Participant 17	28	13	Primary school	None	Aleppo	32
Participant 18	31	13	Primary school	None	Aleppo	40
Participant 20	33	24	Ph.D.	Teacher	Aleppo	38

Most of the study's participants were originally from Aleppo, with one participant from Idlib. Their length of residence in Türkiye ranged from three to 10 years, and their ages varied between 22 and 60 years. A notable age difference was observed between the women and their spouses, ranging from four to 14 years.

In terms of educational background, most participants had completed only primary school, a few had attended secondary education, two were illiterate, and one completed PhD degree. These educational trajectories reflect prevailing cultural norms in Syria that promote early marriage and limit women's access to education. All participants reported that girls commonly leave school after completing the sixth grade, as early marriage is seen as a means of protecting family honor. Early marriage was prevalent among participants: seven participants married between the ages of 13 and 14, six between 15 and 17, and the remaining participants at age 18 or older. Under Syrian law, girls are legally permitted to marry from the age of 13. Employment among women was rare; only three had work experience. Cultural restrictions also constrained women's employment opportunities, confining them mostly to home-based activities such as tailoring and hairdressing, activities typically sanctioned by their husbands.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, the researcher employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model of thematic analysis, which provides a structured yet flexible approach to identifying patterns within qualitative data. The six interconnected stages include: 1)familiarization with the data, 2)generating initial codes, 3)searching for themes, 4)reviewing themes, 5) defining and naming themes, and 6)producing the report.

To facilitate the coding process, the researcher used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software that enabled the systematic organization, coding, and retrieval of data segments. The analysis process was iterative, with the researcher moving back and forth between the different phases. Each stage was revisited multiple times, as coding is a dynamic and evolving task that requires constant refinement. Codes were revised, deleted, or added as necessary to ensure that the emerging themes accurately reflected the data. This recursive process ultimately allowed the researcher to identify and define the study's central themes.

The Ethical Framework of the Study

The ethical framework of this study is grounded in institutional and qualitative feminist research guidelines to ensure participant safety, confidentiality, and empowerment. Before beginning data collection, the researcher obtained ethical approval (E-12908312-300-00001396874) from Hacettepe University's Committee of Scientific Research in January 2021. This required informed consent, participant safety, impartiality, and respect for human dignity.

Additionally, the researcher followed the World Health Organization's (2002) ethical and safety recommendations for research on domestic violence, incorporating the five key ethical principles for qualitative social work research: integrating ethics throughout the research process, empowering vulnerable participants, ensuring informed consent, avoiding harm, and maintaining academic competence.

The researcher prioritized building trust, using pseudonyms to protect identities, and fostering participant empowerment by connecting participants to social services, supporting their personal and professional growth, and maintaining supportive relationships beyond data collection. This approach aligned with feminist research principles, emphasizing mutual respect, collaboration, and valuing participants' lived experiences.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the data revealed several key themes related to women's experiences with IPV (IPV) across different periods of their lives. These themes are:

1. ***Forms of IPV during the pre-war period***: the dominant themes during this phase centered around prevailing customs and traditions, and how these cultural norms contributed to the normalization and perpetuation of violence against women.

2. ***Forms of IPV during the war, internal displacement, and asylum-seeking periods:*** the dominant themes during this phase centered around the social and economic upheaval caused by the war and its implications for women's experiences of IPV. The second theme is the changes that occurred in the forms of IPV after moving to Türkiye and the change in women's perceptions toward violence.

Forms of Intimate Partner Violence during the Pre-War period

During this period, the study found that Syrian social customs and traditions played a pivotal role in women's exposure to various forms of IPV, creating an environment conducive to the occurrence and normalization of violence, as previously discussed. Key customs contributing to this include early marriage, the emphasis on ensuring a bride's virginity commonly symbolized by the "white sheet tradition" and cohabitation with the

husband's extended family. These practices contributed to women's vulnerability to sexual, physical, economic, and psychological violence, as well as controlling behaviors.

For example, the practice of verifying a bride's virginity on her wedding night has had negative consequences for women, making them more vulnerable to sexual violence. Some participants experienced negative health effects, including bleeding, vaginismus, fainting, and severe vaginal injuries.

Each form of IPV involves different actions, most of which result from the social structure of a patriarchal system. The most common form of IPV reported was forced sexual intercourse. The mechanism of forcing a sexual relationship differs from one husband to another. While some use physical violence to compel their wives, others employ methods such as threatening to marry another woman, accusing their wives of having a sexual relationship with another man, or threatening to inform her family. Some also punish their wives economically by depriving them of household necessities, including food. For these reasons, women often feel forced to comply with their husbands' sexual demands to avoid the occurrence or escalation of IPV. Two of the participants reported that, throughout their marriage, they never engaged in consensual sexual intercourse, as they complied with their husbands' demands out of fear of violence. They explained that as follows:

> "He forced me all the time, and whenever I refused, he would punish me the next day by depriving us of basic household necessities. Throughout my entire marriage, I never engaged in sexual intercourse by my own consent. I did so only out of fear—to avoid problems or to prevent him from suspecting that I was being unfaithful." (Participant 2, 52 years old, Aleppo).

> "My husband continuously coerced me into sexual intercourse. I never desired intimacy with him; I complied only to avoid his anger. I was afraid of him. I resented him, his mother, and all his family. I had no sincere emotional connection with him. I never felt safe in his presence, nor did I truly perceive him as my husband." (Participant 18, 28 years old, Aleppo).

The experiences of participants reveal that sexual coercion was not merely an individual act of violence but a systemic mechanism enforcing male dominance, where refusal led to punishment whether through physical abuse, economic deprivation, or psychological intimidation. These patterns align with radical feminist theory, which argues that patriarchal societies treat women's bodies as male property, normalizing non-consensual sex within marriage.

Most participants reported experiencing physical violence, with some stating that the abuse was more severe while they were in Syria. This prevalence was attributed to societal norms that legitimized a husband's use of physical force as a means of controlling his family. In Syria's patriarchal social structure, men are positioned as authority figures, while women

are expected to manage childcare, perform household duties, and obey their husbands. These dynamics led many women to perceive such violence as a normal part of marriage.

Additionally, all participants reported that their husbands' families contributed to their exposure to IPV. Traditional practices of living with the husband's family often resulted in a lack of privacy and frequent interference, particularly with mothers-in-law, in the wife's personal affairs. Moreover, some women shared that their husbands would sometimes physically abuse them in front of their family to assert their masculinity and authority.

Participants are subjected to various forms of physical violence, including beating, pushing, punching, hair-pulling, slapping, and attacks with sharp objects such as a knife. Such abuses led to feelings of worthlessness and deep humiliation, severely damaging their sense of dignity and self-esteem. Even during pregnancy, some participants were subjected to physical violence. One participant explained that the frequent beatings she endured during pregnancy resulted in multiple miscarriages. As she described:

> "I got married as a small child. Then I got pregnant when I was 15 and miscarried, and the second time, I got pregnant I was 17, but I also miscarried because my husband beat me all the time. Also, because my back was too weak to bear a child. My husband used to hit me a lot." (Participant 13, 31 Y, Aleppo).

In addition to physical violence and controlling behavior, the study found that participants were extensively exposed to psychological violence in Syria. This was due to the patriarchal culture that puts women in second place in the family and allows men to insult and humiliate them. One of the most common forms of psychological abuse reported was humiliation, which deeply undermines self-respect. Participants defined a range of abusive behaviors, including being insulted in front of others, subjected to screaming and destruction of objects, and enduring verbal attacks that reduce their value. Many recounted threats of marrying another person or divorce and harm to their relatives. Women also reported emotional neglect, such as not receiving affection or respect or being excluded from decision related to their children or domestic matters. These experiences consistently left women feeling inferior, lowering their self-esteem, and often involving humiliation in front of their children. One participant described this sense of powerlessness and devaluation in her marriage. "In our society, a woman inside the home feels that she has no value and that her life has no meaning. She is like a chair or any other lifeless object in the house. She has no say in any decisions; everything is controlled by her husband, and she is treated like his maid" (Participant 3, 30 years old, Aleppo).

Another form of psychological violence reported by participants was the constant pressure to bear more children, especially male children, which was often accompanied by threats of divorce or polygamy, which created ongoing fear and anxiety. One participant shared her experiences:

> "When I first got married, I did not get pregnant for a long time. My husband's family used to say that I couldn't get pregnant, and my mother-in-law would say, 'I wanted my son to marry again. We want a boy to support my son.' I was always afraid that he would marry another woman. After we moved to Turkey, we went to the hospital and got treatment, and then I had two boys" (Participant 12, 43 years old, Aleppo).

Controlling behavior manifested in various ways, including physically confining wives to the home, limiting visits to their families, and forbidding them from leaving the house without male accompaniment. Some husbands also prevented their wives from pursuing education or accessing healthcare, particularly when services involved male professionals. Additionally, many participants reported that their husbands monitored or restricted their mobile phone use. Notably, some women interpreted these behaviors as expressions of love or jealousy, rather than recognizing them as controlling. These practices reflect deeply entrenched cultural and patriarchal norms shaping marital dynamics in Syria. Feminist theorists have long emphasized that when women are socialized to value obedience and dependence, coercion and control may be internalized and normalized. This complicity is not a reflection of women's weakness but of how patriarchal power operates subtly through cultural norms and emotional attachments.

Controlling behavior often escalates into economic violence, manifesting as the deliberate deprivation of women's access to financial resources. The study found financial deprivation and neglect of material needs the most prevalent forms of economic violence. These dynamics were especially pronounced in households where women lived with their husbands' extended families, where financial resources and material provisions were collectively managed, further deepening women's economic dependence.

Through the analysis of Syrian women's experiences with IPV during the pre-war period, it becomes evident that IPV is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, harmful social norms, and traditions that reinforce male authority and female subordination. The accounts of sexual coercion, physical abuse, psychological violence, controlling behavior, and economic deprivation reflect the broader systemic oppression that shape women's lives in Syria. In the next section, the analysis will focus on how internal conflicts, the collapse of social systems, widespread violence, and cross-border displacement in search of safety have further shaped women's experiences with IPV.

Forms of IPV during War, Internal Displacement, and Asylum-Seeking in Türkiye

Women and children are disproportionately affected during times of war and internal conflict (Holt, 2013). The absence of security and social protection leads to a surge in gender-based violence against women. This study argues that after the war began in 2011, the collapse of the economic and social infrastructure contributed to the persistence of

IPV. All participants were forced to flee their homes, which were destroyed by bombings, leaving them with no choice but to relocate to relatively safer areas within Syria that offered basic services despite being overcrowded with displaced populations.

The displacement process presented numerous challenges, resulting in significant negative impacts on participants, with IPV being one of many critical issues. Indeed, the study highlighted a rise in IPV incidents during displacement, particularly physical and psychological abuse, including beatings, shouting, and verbal abuse. Husbands often used IPV to express their frustration over deteriorating economic conditions, unemployment, the loss of property, and the harsh realities of living in displacement camps. The participants explained these harsh living conditions in the following accounts:

> "There were a lot of explosions in Aleppo, even our house was bombed. We left Aleppo and went to Bab al-Salama camp. We stayed there for seven months but living in the camp is difficult. There were no bathrooms nearby. At that time, my husband became nervous all day. He yelled at me and the children. I became afraid to talk to him so that he might beat me or the children. I was silent all the time. I prayed to God a lot to save us from the camp life" (Participant 8, 40 years old, Aleppo).

> "My husband and I started having problems when we moved to the camp and he lost his job. Our economic situation became extremely difficult. When a storm hit the camp, our tent collapsed, and the mud and rain flooded everything. My husband grew exhausted and frustrated with the situation and became increasingly cruel towards me. Life in the camp was unbearable, and he would often return filled with anger. Sometimes I confronted him, asking why he directed his anger at me. I would cry, and other times I stayed silent because I knew he was upset, and there was nothing I could do to change our circumstances" (Participant 9, 24 years old, Aleppo).

As the war escalated and spread to previously safe areas, most Syrians were forced to flee neighboring countries, including Türkiye, which became a primary host country for refugees due to its geographical proximity and its "open-door" policy between 2011 and 2014. In this period, participants reported that the incidence of IPV decreased, describing changes in how certain IPV acts were expressed, particularly in relation to controlling behaviors and economic restrictions. Moreover, women's perceptions about violence began to shift during this period.

One of the most critical factors that contributed to a reduction in violence was living in a house separate from the husband's extended family. All participants reported that after seeking asylum in Türkiye, they lived independently from their husband's family. This reflects how physical and social environments are often shaped and reinforced by patriarchal control. Participants described experiencing a greater sense of freedom in these

separate living arrangements, noting that they were no longer under the constant supervision of their mothers-in-law or subject to interference in their married life. The participants reflected on their experiences of living separately from their husband's extended family as follows:

> "When I was in Syria, my marriage was full of problems because of my mother-in-law. I was the first to come to Turkey, I lived in a house of my own, my life changed, I became free, and no one controlled me. I now feel very, very comfortable, because I live in a house for myself and there is no supervision from anyone" (Participant 1, 41 years old, Aleppo).

> "After I came to Turkey and lived in a house for myself, I became stronger, and if I went back in time and came back to live with my mother-in-law, it is impossible to repeat with her the same life of injustice that I was living through, I would not be silent about the injustice. Because, after I came to Turkey, I knew that women have rights like their husbands, I was in the process of attending lectures at the center and I also saw how the Turkish men treat their wives with respect. My life in Turkey is much better than in Syria because I am alone and my husband's family is not with me. Even my husband changed the way he dealt with me after we came to Turkey. What happened the day he hit me when we were in Syria, he beat me because my mother-in-law wanted that. Sometimes when I remember the life I used to live, I feel surprised that I endured it. In Syria sometimes I regretted my marriage because I was young and did not know anything in life" (Participant 6, 32 years old, Aleppo).

> Participants elaborated on how certain forms of IPV, particularly controlling behaviors and economic restrictions, were experienced differently after seeking asylum in Turkey. Many described noticeable improvements in their husbands' behavior. For instance, they recalled that in Syria, young women were not allowed to go to the market alone and had to be accompanied by a male relative or a mother-in-law. This reflects feminist arguments that highlight how restrictive gender norms and culturally enforced dependence on male guardians are embedded in patriarchal societies. However, after relocating to Turkey, this situation shifted, influenced by the norms of the host society. Several women expressed that they now feel a greater sense of freedom compared to their lives in Syria. One common example was that their husbands allowed them to visit neighbors or go shopping alone something that had not been permitted when we were in Syria. As Participant 5 mentioned, "My husband in the first days of our marriage had a lot of control over me, but after we moved to Turkey, the situation changed, and I felt more freedom" (Participant 5, 33 Y, Aleppo).

In addition to changes in controlling behaviors, participants also described shifts in economic violence. A study indicated that changes in gender roles after resettlement

contributed to a reduction in economic violence, as some women became responsible for managing household needs. Many participants explained that they were now able to go to the market alone to purchase necessities for themselves and their children. This shift was largely attributed to the working conditions faced by men in Türkiye specifically, jobs that were far from home and involved long hours. As a result, husbands were often unable to handle daily shopping responsibilities and began delegating these tasks to their wives. While this change offered women more mobility and decision-making power, some expressed feeling an additional burden, as they were expected to fulfill these new responsibilities alongside traditional household duties.

Although some participants reported a reduction in IPV, others stated that their experience of physical violence did not change significantly. These women often tolerated or justified the violence. As one participant explained:

> "In Turkey, the difficult economic conditions affected my husband, the children, and me. When a man is financially frustrated, he has no place to release his anger other than his wife and children. Therefore, when he is angry, I take my children to my mother's house, where we spend one or two hours and then come back. I try to avoid making the situation worse, so I don't talk to him, and he doesn't ask me for money or anything" (Participant 10, 33 years old, Aleppo).

This reflects what feminist theory argues: in patriarchal societies, ideologies of male dominance normalize, tolerate, or even justify violence against women. Such social structures shape women's perceptions, leading them to accept violence as an inevitable part of their lives. Hindin (2003), WHO (2005), and Hacettepe University Institute of Population Studies (2019) have reported similar findings.

The most significant change in women's experiences with IPV during their asylum in Türkiye was their shift in attitudes toward violence. While they previously viewed violence as normal and believed their husbands had the right to inflict it, this perception changed after seeking asylum in Türkiye. The impact of the programs provided to Syrian refugee women by government agencies and international organizations interested in issues of violence against women were intended to raise awareness about violence against women, educating them about their rights, and how to benefit from available support, be it through lectures presented by psychological and social support centers for refugee women and municipalities and women's organizations. One participant mentioned:

> "Before I understood life, I thought that it was normal for a man to hit his wife and control her and that a woman should be patient and satisfied with her husband and not tell anyone, so she can go to paradise. And because I also saw my father beating my mother, I was thinking about it as normal. But after I came to Turkey, my life was completely different. The reason for my awareness in Turkey is that I used to go to attend lectures on women's rights and see how the Turkish men treat their wives

> and that here in Turkey there is no difference between women and men, they are equal in everything. And my idea has changed a lot. I learned here in Turkey that a woman is not supposed to be silent about her husband's bad behavior. I began confronting my husband and rejecting his actions. For example, when he tried to hit me or prevent me from doing something, I started asking, 'Why are you raising your hand against me? Why do you prevent me from going outside?' That's what I mean I learned not to stay silent about my rights." (Participant 16, 33 Y, Aleppo).

The shift in participants' attitudes toward IPV during their asylum in Türkiye reflects a key concept in feminist theory, namely, consciousness-raising. Initially, many women perceived IPV as an accepted and expected part of marital life, aligning with what radical feminist theory describes as the internalization of patriarchal ideologies, wherein male dominance and female subordination are regarded as natural and justified (Walker, 1979; Haj-Yahia, 2005).

The analysis of women's experiences during the war and internal displacement reveals that IPV intensified due to heightened insecurity, harsh living conditions, and economic hardship. However, the transition to asylum in Türkiye brought noticeable changes in women's experiences, particularly in the reduction of controlling behaviors and economic restrictions. While physical and sexual violence largely persisted, many women reported a significant shift in their attitudes toward IPV and an increased awareness of their rights following resettlement in Türkiye.

Discussion

This study adopted a feminist theoretical framework to investigate Syrian refugee experiences with IPV across three periods: pre-war period, war and internal displacement period and seeking asylum period in Türkiye. These periods were chosen to understand how patriarchal structures contribute to women's exposure to violence. The study also aimed to explore the impact of internal conflicts, the collapse of social support systems, widespread violence, and cross-border displacement on the prevalence and nature of IPV.

The study found that, during the pre-war period, the patriarchal structure in Syria placed women in an inherently subordinate role, with men regarded as the heads of households and primary decision-makers in family affairs. Cultural norms and traditions routed in this patriarchal system, such as the emphasis on verifying the bride's virginity on the wedding night (commonly known as the 'white sheet tradition') and expectation for women to live with the husband's extended family, played a significant role in exposing women to IPV.

Many participants reported that a primary reason for their exposure to IPV in Syria was living with the husband's extended family. The interference of in-laws in their private lives often exacerbated tensions and contributed to incidents of abuse. In some cases, husbands verbally or physically assaulted their wives in front of family members as means of

asserting their masculinity. The patriarchal ideal of the man as the unquestioned leader of household reinforced this dynamic, encouraging displays of dominance to maintain a socially sanctioned image of male authority. Moreover, society did not perceive verbal or physical abuse against wives as violence but rather as part of the husband's role in disciplining both the wife and children. These findings illustrate how patriarchal norms justify and legitimize abusive behavior. They also align with Aljan's (2022) study, which revealed that actions women describe as violent are often dismissed by men as mere "arguments" or a "way of educating the wives," thereby morally legitimizing violence (Aljan, 2022, p. 9804).

The findings of this study regarding the pre-war period align with core principles of feminist theory, which argue that gender-based power imbalances rooted in patriarchal structures are fundamental to understanding violence against women, including IPV. Feminist theorists have long argued that patriarchy is not merely a set of individual attitudes but a systemic social order that privileges men and subordinates women across institutional, cultural, and interpersonal domains.

During the period of internal displacement and asylum, the collapse of Syria's economic and social systems following the onset of war in 2011 contributed to the persistence of IPV. Drawing on feminist intersectionality theory, this study reveals that IPV does not occur in isolation but emerges from the intersection of gender with broader structural factors, including displacement, asylum, and economic hardship. Previous studies have also documented an increase in IPV rates since the beginning of the war (Freedman, 2016), which is consistent with the current study's findings. Most participants were forcibly displaced to refugee camps near the Turkish border, where they faced numerous hardships, including overcrowding, limited access to basic services, poverty, and food insecurity. In these conditions, the inability of men to fulfill their traditional roles as providers contributed to heightened frustration and aggression, with women often bearing the consequences of this distress through IPV.

From a radical feminist perspective, these dynamics reflect how systemic gendered power imbalances are reproduced in displacement settings. In patriarchal societies, where men control most societal resources, displacement and the resulting loss of status may lead them to reassert dominance through violence against women, reinforcing male dominance and female subordination within both the private and public spheres.

Conclusion

This study employed a feminist theoretical framework to examine Syrian married refugee women's experiences with IPV across three periods. The findings align with the core tenets of feminist theory, which assert that unequal power dynamics between men and women in patriarchal societies, reinforced by cultural norms and traditions that legitimize violence, are fundamental drivers of women's exposure to persecution and abuse.

IPV represents a critical manifestation of these structural inequalities, underscoring the profoundly adverse effects of patriarchal social structures on women's lives.

A key finding of this study is that Syrian women experienced high levels of IPV during the pre-war period in Syria, largely due to deeply entrenched patriarchal customs and traditions that create a conducive environment for IPV. Moreover, by adopting a longitudinal perspective that captures women's experiences, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of how changing social, cultural, and structural contexts shape women's exposure to IPV. It also addresses a significant gap in the existing literature on Syrian refugee women's experiences with IPV, particularly within the Turkish context, a topic that had received limited scholarly attention.

The study found out that seeking asylum in Türkiye significantly contributed to increased awareness among some participants regarding violence against women and their legal rights. This awareness was primarily cultivated through lectures and programs offered by psychological and social support centers for refugees, as well as municipal initiatives. Furthermore, living in Türkiye provided women with new perspectives on marital relationships by observing interactions of Turkish couples. This exposure led them to realize that their husbands' abusive behavior, which they had previously considered normal in Syria, was not acceptable. Despite their increased awareness of their rights and heightened recognition of abusive behavior, many women still refrained from seeking help from official support sources when experiencing IPV.

Although this qualitative study does not aim to produce generalizable results, its in-depth insights contribute to a deeper understanding of Syrian women's experiences with IPV. These findings open the door for future studies to further explore the evolving IPV in different displacement settings and across diverse refugee populations.

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