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Towards Belonging: Stability and Home for Syrian Refugee Women in Milan

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Abstract. The concept of belonging is significant in current debates about refugee settlement in the host countries as it is associated with being able to 'feel at home' in a specific place and is considered as a precondition to quality of life. This paper explores how stability and living conditions of Syrian refugee women, during early stages of settlement in Milan, affect the process of developing a sense of belonging to the personal space of home. The research takes on a qualitative approach relying on in-depth interviews with seven Syrian women. The concept of belonging is examined as both an individual and collective issue. The findings revealed the centrality of the home in participants' lives as well as the feelings associated with it. The paper also suggests that developing a feeling of belonging is directly influenced by the transformative effect of displacement on their gender and class. Finally, the paper concludes that while developing a sense of belonging in its totality is multidimensional, it is fundamentally conditioned by the provision of a stable home and secured living conditions.

Keywords: *belonging, Syrian refugees, refugee women, gender, housing*

Introduction

Italy has been a main destination for asylum seekers from different countries because of its location on the external borders of the EU. between 2013 and 2015, an estimated 61,078 Syrians reached the Italian coasts, only 2.7 percent filed an asylum application in Italy while the rest made secondary movements within the EU to their final destinations (Ministero dell'Interno, 2015; Eurostat, 2019; SPRAR et al., 2017). Hence, Italy was considered a 'temporary transit' in their northwards journey (Naga 2016).

Several studies highlighted that these secondary movements were motivated by reasons other than migration policies and access to protection; including the presence of relatives and friends in those countries, labor-market conditions, the provision of welfare benefits and the awareness of structural weakness of the Italian reception system and integration policies (Brekke &

Brochmann, 2015; Denaro, 2016).

In the following years, Italy's role has changed from a transit to a host country for the Syrian refugees. Several settlement schemes[1] have been activated to provide channels of safe entry without subjecting the asylum seekers' lives to threats through dangerous journeys (European Commission 2018; Caritas Italiana, 2019).

Accordingly, it is necessary to examine the different dimensions of refugees' settlement in the country amid profound change resulted by displacement. The concept of belonging becomes of particular importance in current debates about refugee settlement in the host countries. Belonging is considered a central concept in people's lives; it is associated with being able to 'feel at home' in a specific place and is considered as a precondition to quality of life (Anthias 2006). Naturally, the notion of belonging becomes particularly complex for refugees, as displacement results not only in the loss of a sense of home but also produces a transformation in belonging and identity. As pointed out by many scholars, the absence of the feelings of belonging and attachment tends to increase the refugees' feelings of being displaced and 'out of place' (Anthias 2006, Antonsich 2010).

The research adopts a qualitative approach in exploring how stability and living conditions of Syrian refugees during the early stages of settlement[2] affect the process of developing a sense of belonging to new and unfamiliar settings and how this process is influenced by factors such as gender, class and ethnicity.

While refugees may develop a sense of belonging to multiple places starting from the private scale of home to the scale of public collective spaces of the neighborhood and the city, this paper focuses on belonging to the personal space of home as an expected site for belonging to first emerge.

The paper starts by bringing together literature outlining the concept of belonging as both an individual and a collective issue and aiming to specify the different dimensions that facilitate or limit this feeling. The following section offers

[1] Several European settlement schemes have been activated in 2015 whereby 1,706 persons had arrived in Italy by mid-2018 (European Commission 2018). The humanitarian corridors scheme, initiated by the civil society organization in Italy in 2015, provide entry to more than 1,610 people, mainly Syrian, transferred to Italy from Lebanon between 2016 and June 2019 (Caritas Italiana 2019). It also takes up the responsibility of the reception and socio-economic integration and offering support during the procedure of applying for political asylum (Mediterranean Hope 2018).

2 The term 'early stages' is used here to refer to a period from two to five years post-arrival. The minimum of two years of living in Italy was set to give a chance for the settlement experiences to build up.

an overview of the research approach along with details of the participant recruitment and profiles. This is followed by an in-depth empirical analysis in which the meaning of stability and its role in shaping the sense of belonging is investigated. And finally, the paper concludes that the participants' personal experiences of searching for a home are disrupted by feelings of instability and insecurity that affect their lives and lead to an ambiguous future.

Belonging: a multidimensional concept

The term 'belonging' has become a dominant discourse in the policy debates around identity, migration, integration and social cohesion. These debates have underlined the importance of scrutinizing the notion of belonging as it is central in people's lives and both social and political practices (Hamaz and Vasta 2009, Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Kofman 2005).

In a broad sense, belonging translates into a feeling as well as a set of practices, it can be linked to many different social and spatial terms (Gilmartin 2017, Wright 2015). The social dimension of belonging is related to the membership and attachment to a particular social group that can vary in size and scale from family or local community to the nation. While the spatial dimension of belonging is linked to the feeling of attachment to a particular place and how this feeling can form towards places of different geographical scales starting from the scale of the home to the State. (Yuval-Davis 2003, Gilmartin 2017). Ultimately, belonging is a contested and multidimensional concept that is influenced by multiple factors; thus, it must be located on different analytical levels (Christensen, 2009; Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005).

This research draws on scholarly discussions on the concept of belonging, specifically on Antonsich's (2010) work. He offers a comprehensive cross-discipline review of literature on belonging, suggesting an analytical framework to the concept of belonging organized around two major analytical dimensions; first belonging as a 'personal, intimate, private sentiment of place attachment' (place-belongingness), and secondly as a collective practice influenced by a complex set of power relations defining who belongs and who does not (politics of belonging). Following Yuval-Davis' (2006) differentiation between belonging which is about emotional attachment and feeling 'at home' from politics of belonging connected with the construction of belonging within power structures in the society. Antonsich (2010)

argues that it is necessary to avoid the recurrent mistake in discussions of belonging by focusing on either one dimension since they mutually influence each other and contribute to the embodiment of belonging.

The personal emotion of an individual towards a particular place generates what Antonsich terms 'place-belongingness'. In other words, it is about feeling at home and safe in a place (Yuval-Davis 2006). Home represents a symbolic place that offers security, familiarity and comfort besides being a place of lived experiences. The idea of home may be localized to particular place(s) including house, neighborhood, urban spaces, city and country (Lähdesmäki, et al. 2016). This coincides with Mee and Wright's (2009) argument that belonging is an 'inherently geographical concept' that connects people to places through discourses of boundary making and inhabitation. Place, therefore, is implicated in the formation of belonging in both its affective and political dimensions.

Antonsich (2010) identified five main dimensions that shape a personal sense of belonging. First, auto-biographical factors that relate to the subjective experiences of an individual such as past experiences, relations and memories, all contribute to a person's attachment to a particular place. For refugees who come to live in a completely unknown country to which they do not have prior associated memory, the accumulation of lived experiences and activities over time and space is crucial to communicate their sense of belonging. Second, relational factors that refer to the social relations that give experiential content to people's lives. They involve both emotionally dense relationships such as family ties and network of friends, and weak ties with people who share the same geographical environment.

Third, cultural factors involve forms of cultural expressions such as language, traditions and habits that can evoke a feeling of familiarity and belonging to a society. While cultural connections can facilitate a sense of belonging among individuals with shared national identity and culture, it can perform as an obstacle towards belonging to a new societal context (Antonsich 2010, Buonfino and Thomson 2007).

Fourth, Antonsich (2010) highlights the importance of economic factors in establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging, not only by creating safe and stable material conditions but also through their economic place in society, people feel they have a say in the future of the place. Moreover, through active economic participation in society, people can feel recognized and start to form a sense of achievement, self-esteem and belonging, which can lead ultimately to a positive feeling towards the host country (Hagendoorn, Veenman and Vollebergh 2003).

Lastly, to be entitled to legal rights such as to enter the state, remain there and to work or study there, to be able to plan a future in a safe manner, is what Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) calls "security spatial rights". These among other legal rights are essential to produce security which is significant for the feeling of belonging to be enacted, according to many scholars. Security in this sense is about having access to the resources that enable individuals to manage the instability of their existing situation (Antonsich 2010).

Antonsich (2010) adds the length of residence as another factor that may influence the sense of place-belongingness among newcomers. Several studies have shown that the length of residency in a particular place, has a positive correlation to belonging (Puddifoot 2003, Markova and Black 2007, Kitchen, Williams and Gallina 2015). Markova and Black (2007) for example, argue that migrants' sense of belonging, whether to their neighborhood or the host country, increases over time due to the increase in resources and improved quality of life over time.

As discussed above, whilst migrants' personal sense of belonging to a place in which they settle remains significant in how they negotiate belonging; it is not just an individual affair and should not be isolated from structural expressions of inclusion and exclusion that locate people belonging or non-belonging to a specific collectivity (Antonsich 2010). As Visser states, "the personal feeling 'I belong here' is unavoidably influenced by a complex set of power relations" (2017, 1-2), Therefore, it is crucial to investigate both facets of belonging to understand the interplay between them (Antonsich 2010).

Research approach and methods

The research is based on a qualitative, exploratory approach aiming to extract the rich subjective experiences and perspectives. The choice of refugee women to be the focus of the study was motivated by studies showing that women experience migration differently from men which makes their needs qualitatively different from those of men and must therefore be addressed distinctly from them (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009; Nasser-Eddin, 2017). The research participants are Syrian women who had arrived in Milan after the Syrian conflict had started in 2011.

Participants were recruited using the snowballing technique by approaching informal networks that can provide contact to Syrian refugees, such as mosques and Syrian cafés. The sample was not to be restricted to certain characteristics such as

specific age, marital status, religion, etc. Eventually, seven Syrian women were interviewed. All of them self-proclaimed 'middle-class' back in Syria.

All but one had obtained political asylum[3]. The remaining participant had come to Italy after her husband was granted political asylum and applied for family reunification. All participants have been living in Milan for a period, ranging between two years and five years.

The table below gives an overview of the key characteristics of the participants.

	Name[4]	**Age**	**Occupation (Syria/Italy)**	**Date of arrival**	**Marital status**	**Family composition in Italy**
1	Farah	30	employed/ employed	mid-2015	single	none
2	Salwa	39	employed/ seeking a job	mid-2017	married	a husband and a child
3	Kinda	31	housewife/ seeking a job	end of 2016	married	a husband and two children
4	Eman	29	student/ seeking a job	end of 2016	single	a mother and two brothers
5	Amal	47	housewife/ seeking a job	end of 2016	married	three children
6	Mona	29	employed/ employed	mid-2017	married	a husband
7	Lamia	36	housewife/ informal work	end of 2014	married	a husband and two children

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted between December 2018 and March 2019. Most of the interviews took place in public spaces chosen by the participants, mostly in cafés, and twice the researcher was invited to the participant's home. Each interview lasted around two hours. The language used

[3] It grants a residence permit for five years and renewable. This also allow access to education and employment as well as social and health assistance and access to public housing under the same conditions as Italians (Ministero dell'Interno 2015). However, in some regions, access to public housing is subject to a minimum residence requirement on the national territory. For example, in Milan, the regional law of 2007, requires renting a residence for a minimum of five years in Lombardy in order to apply for public housing (Agustoni 2007)

4 To guarantee confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all the participants.

during the interviews was Arabic, the mother tongue of both the researcher and the participants. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The recordings were later transcribed and translated carefully by the researcher, but the possibility that some meanings were lost in translation evidently remains.

After the initial stage of familiarization during the transcription process, three main steps were followed during the analysis. The first step involved a close reading of narratives by looking at the text of each participant following the holistic-content mode of reading to gain a complete understanding of each experience separately (Fenster 2004). Following, a categorical-content approach was used to "identify important themes or categories within a body of content, and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those themes/categories" (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009, 11). Therefore, the second step involved defining the different themes expressed by the participants in each interview. After that, the thematic similarities between the interviews were defined, looking into how these multiple themes interconnect. At last, these themes were examined against the broad factors that influence the process of developing a sense of belonging previously defined.

Seeking stability post-displacement

Developing a sense of belonging and to feel at home involve questions about stability and being able to plan a future. In discussing the prospects of settling down with the participants, two significant factors emerged; the first is related to work, while the second relates to housing. These factors are intertwining as indicated by the participants; having a secure job provides adequate housing which they consider as a necessity above all.

Mona, for example, imagines that having a stable job is the only factor involved in securing her future: "I'm so scared of the future that's why I don't think about it. But if there is work, the work contract will protect you and nothing else". Another participant, Salwa shares the same perspective: "…work will provide everything; the apartment and everything else". Similarly, Lamia says: "If you asked me what are the two things that you want the most, I'd say that I wish for my language to improve and for our business[5] to flourish".

[5] Lamia and her husband have started a home-based catering business a couple of years ago.

The centrality of homeownership

Most of the participants had belonged to the middle class in their home country. However, as capitals and assets are not easily transferable in the case of forced migration, refugees tend to experience an economically disadvantaged position in their host countries in terms of overall wealth. In her account, Lamia was trying to explain why the financial situation had resurfaced many times during the interview as one of her main concerns in contrast to her situation back in Syria and how this is affecting her daughter:

> "In Syria, we weren't troubled with financial matters. I have never known what my father owns or his income… I don't know other than that he is financially stable… Now, my daughter bears some kind of financial concern, maybe because she doesn't see her father in a fixed job or owning a place."

In her statement, Lamia raises a significant factor that made a difference in her feelings of financial security and stability, besides having a fixed job she mentioned the ownership of a home. Other participants shared Lamia's perspective which is logical considering their social class back in Syria and its implications[6]. As middle-class individuals in their origin country, the participants had lived in their owned homes. As they explained, this means that they were living in one house their whole life, moving out in limited cases. Here it is argued that their previous experiences of ownership play a significant role in their feelings of displacement and how they are perceiving their relationship with their rented homes and their experience of repeatedly moving between them.

The significance of ownership is concluded by Salwa: "there is no place of residence yet in Syria there was one. The place of residence is the base; when you own a place it is different from renting". Similarly, Eman stated: "it was enough that we had a home and you know that you won't move out". She goes on explaining the importance of home as the anchor point in her daily life: "Home is security for sure—at least you have a place to sleep; it is where I come back after I go out". Despite the centrality of the home, for her, it is associated with instability and a sense of discomfort due to the temporality of their situation as she explained: "It is hard to move from one place to another. This is our second place, in the first period we

[6] "In Syria the middle class own their own home, car and a job; has a private work, for example, a shop, an office, a small factory". A participant explaining the characteristics of middle class in Syria

stayed in a different place then we moved in here. Now we have to move to another temporary one till we find another. Can you imagine our situation!".

While Salwa explained the missing feeling of belonging towards her new environment in contrast to her environment back in Syria. For her, to be able to belong is conditional on the ownership of a home and being surrounded by family. Factors that are absent from her current environment and cause her fear of the future leading ultimately to a feeling of detachment:

> "Wherever you go, you belong to your childhood environment, although I had my son here and I'm so happy—my son means a lot to me. But if it were up to me, I want him to live with me there [in Syria] … Here, I'm scared of the future, there is no future, it is unknown, you don't have a home or anything while in your country, you have a home, a life, and a family."

Similarly, Kinda expressed her feeling towards her current home, saying: "it is not mine. I feel threatened there, I don't feel stability in this place, I'm afraid in it, especially when they told us that we have to move out".

The previous experiences are of the participants who were forced to move several times. The refugees who arrive to Italy through resettlement schemes are usually placed in governmental centers for weeks until they are distributed to private apartments that depends on the real-estate availability of the managing organization. The unplanned nature of localization forces the refugees to move several times and in some cases to different cities as reported by the participants.

Alternatively, Lamia who has been living in the same apartment since she arrived in Italy five years ago, expressed her positive feelings towards her current home. She clarified that although she did not have control over the choice of the apartment, she developed a sense of attachment towards it based on taste proximity: "… I didn't choose this apartment or furnished it, but it was closer to my taste, that it is why I feel attached to it". Lamia works from home for her catering business which is another factor that contributes to these positive feelings as she explained: "here [in her home], you are learning, you feel that you are doing something to improve yourself and solve your problems. Therefore, there is a sense of comfort to some extent, but there isn't a place where I feel completely comfortable".

Similarly, another participant, Farah described her experience of living in the same apartment since she arrived and how this gives her a feeling of safety: "I pay rent that I can pay in a better apartment, I can't leave it…. I feel that I want something

to be mine … this gives me the feeling of safety and that this is my place".

These examples show that a sense of attachment and belonging can be developed among refugees who do not have to constantly move their place of living. Yet for those who have to move often the feeling of instability increases and consequently prevent them from developing such feelings.

A shift in homeownership

The financial burden of renting is another main factor impacting resource wealth as conveyed in the interviews. Living in owned homes in Syria, renting did not cause a financial burden for the participants. In light of this change, they expressed how the issue of housing now causes them stress both mentally and financially. The following statement by Amal illustrated her stress over her situation:

> "We weren't used to keep thinking when should I move out…. To move out so frequently! we had a place and we were settled but now you think where to go after moving out of this apartment? what will happen to us? What will happen to these children? A mother doesn't think about herself; she thinks about her children."

Lamia also explains how this change is affecting their life financially:

> "For a person in their own country—maybe because of our class, we didn't suffer because of the issue of rent. Whether when I was in my family's home or after I got married, it was our place; we owned it. You don't think about the rent and how much it costs. This huge burden of rent doesn't exist; that's why life was more luxurious. Here, life is harsh. You find yourself struggling; all day long you are suffering."

In addition to being concerned financially, the participants mentioned the discrimination in the housing market. Salwa explains that renting an apartment is difficult as many owners refuse to rent to Arabs: "It is difficult to rent an apartment from an Italian; they don't rent to Arabs".

Lamia also is facing the same problem as she explained that they rented their current place with the help of an acquaintance when they first arrived. And although it is small for her family now, they do not think about moving out:

> "We rented it when my children were young. It is just one bedroom and a living room…. It was fine with two babies but after this, now, we are disturbed because they are older. It is not a big place, but we can't even think –just think– of moving out because it is impossible to find an alternative…. no one would rent to us. You

know, no one would rent for foreigners. Also, a bigger place will be more expensive. So, we are staying for now."

The participants' experiences of discrimination in the housing market coincide with empirical studies that highlight access to the housing market as one of the main challenges of migrants' integration in Italy along with access to work and social services. Studies have shown that migrants encounter discrimination in the private housing market due to their ethnic background (Agustoni, Alietti and Cucca 2012, Brandsen, et al. 2012, Baldini and Federici 2011). At the same time, public housing as an alternative is inaccessible at this stage of settlement as mentioned before.

The participants mentioned the consequences of instability on different aspects of their lives, for example, Mona explained that although she has been married for more than two years, she does not think about having a child as she and her husband do not have permanent jobs or a fixed place of living. While Kinda expressed her critical need for stability for the children's sake. Kinda is a mother of two; a 16 years old daughter and an eight years old son who was diagnosed with autism:

> "We left Lebanon mainly for the children's mental condition…. we started moving from one place to another and this was harsh on her [their daughter]. My problem is that instability causes my son's condition to deteriorate. So, I wanted to settle down in some place because whenever he moves, he has to start over and acquire new information and new friends. This makes him worse and prevents his improvement. This is my problem. I'm searching for stability and I can't find it. Even here, we moved three times up until now and the fourth is coming."

Instability and changed gender roles

Another result of the persistent financial concerns, several participants are now actively taking part in providing for the household while at the same time maintaining their gender roles as the main caregivers. Deacon and Sullivan (2009) argue that refugee women face challenges in negotiating their gender roles in the new society which might be different from their role in the country of origin. In the Syrian context, displacement can disrupt the traditional[7] gender roles they had in

[7] 'Traditional' here is used to refer to women who were primarily responsible for caring for their husbands, children and the house while men tend to undertake the role of provider—

their countries, forcing Syrian women to challenge their old roles and take on new responsibilities in the hosting communities (Nasser-Eddin, 2017; Harvey, Garwood, & El-Masri, 2013).

The participants indicate that in their home country, they had access to resources and services that enabled them to realize their traditional roles:

> Amal: "My husband was bringing us everything we need, we didn't buy anything, everything was brought to us at home. We didn't have to worry about anything. That's why I'm telling you that after we left Syria we are living in a whirlpool; I feel like I'm living in a whirlpool and can't get out of it."

> Kinda: "I was living in Syria a quite wealthy life, we had a house, a pastry kitchen, and a car. I wasn't responsible for *anything*. My husband was responsible for everything, he would bring anything, he even had a worker working for him to attend to our needs. I had never been to a grocery store…. When I came here, I became responsible for almost everything because my husband's work situation doesn't allow him to help me."

In their new setting, the resource poverty led the participants to undertake new responsibilities whether by seeking jobs or running household errands, such as grocery shopping, going to their children's schools, etc.

Lamia, who has a higher-degree education in Economics, had gotten married right after graduation. She had never thought about working back in Syria as this was not common in her family. Currently, she is a participant in securing life expenses with her husband.

In her account, Salwa reflected on the lack of choice in her decision to work: "[In Syria] a woman can work or not, her life is in her hands, here my life isn't in my hands, I have to work to make a living for my son and my family". Salwa used to work as a nurse in Syria, she mentioned many times that she prefers to work and is actively searching for a job, but she feels that she is forced to work due to financial hardship not as a preference. Mona, who studied biology also worked in Syria as a teacher and now she is working two jobs explaining: "If I stopped working, I have to search for something else…. it is impossible to depend just on his [her husband's] salary".

As discussed previously, the sense of achievement that can result from economic participation can ultimately increase refugees' sense of belonging to the host country. This was clearly illustrated in Kinda's narrative; she explained that even

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breadwinner—for their households, and dominated almost all aspects of society (Lokot 2018, Nasser-Eddin 2017).

if she is now facing several challenges as a refugee in a new country, being in Italy opened up the opportunity for her to achieve her childhood dream to work. Her husband would not allow her to work back in Syria for what might be cultural norms, coupled with financial capability. This all changed when they moved to Italy and that is why she likes it:

> "My dream has been to work since I was a child…. I was dreaming when I came to Italy that I will find a job … but until now I can't find it. I loved Italy because I thought it might give me this opportunity."

To overcome the instability of their living conditions caused by financial hardship, the participants are becoming economically active in their hosting country. Even those who were previously employed in Syria were in fact working as a free choice while in Italy, they are obliged to find a job to meet financial needs in addition to their household caring duties.

Conclusions

The research aimed to assess to what extent the sense of belonging of recent Syrian refugee women in their new environment is influenced by factors such as stability and living conditions and by reflecting on the role of their socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity in their experience.

The multidimensional character of belonging was demonstrated in the way it is intersecting and overlapping with different aspects of the participants' lives. Feelings of attachment and belonging are about being safe and having a secure future. The participants' main concerns were linked to the economic stability and security of housing.

Home proved to be a central space in the women's lives; for most of the participants, it generally represented a space of security and comfort. Regarding their current situation, they revealed strong (whether positive or negative) feelings associated with it. The ownership of a home was demonstrated as a significant factor in the participants' feeling of security and stability due to their socio-economic background in Syria where they all lived in a home which they owned. In Italy, they rely on renting a home and are forced to move repeatedly in addition to the challenges connected with discrimination in the housing market, which lead to the feeling of detachment from their personal space of home. Another significant factor that adds to this centrality is related to their employment situation, as most of the

participants, at the time of the interviews, were unemployed or working from their homes.

The participants experience an economically disadvantaged position due to the immobility of capital and assets. Being used to live in owned homes, the financial burden of rent adds to their financial stress. As a result, they took up new responsibilities in addition to their role as the main caregiver in the household. For some, this meant newfound freedom and sense of empowerment, while for others, there was a clear expression of feeling overwhelmed by these new responsibilities. The interviews also served to convey structural expressions of exclusion in the housing market.

The paper concludes that the participants' personal experiences of searching for a new place of belonging are disrupted by feelings of instability and insecurity that cut across their lives and leads to an ambiguous future. And that their sense of belonging, even two to five years into their asylum experience, has not adequately developed towards their host community. There are clear potential pathways that may form a foundation onto which this sense can be developed such as having a secured source of income and stable housing conditions especially during the first years of resettlement.

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