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Building a new life and (re)making a family.

Young Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands navigating between family and career.

Abstract:
This article presents results of a qualitative analysis based on biographic narratives of three young, well-educated women from Syria. They arrived in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017 in the context of family reunion. The central question is how young Syrian women navigate between two major projects that ask for their agency, being family and work. It is argued that both occupational career development and the building of a family are ‘agentic projects’ that aim to contribute to the establishment of a new life and to regain continuity. The analyses demonstrate that both projects are closely intertwined. Agency emerges as highly relational and intersecting with the women’s position in the life course, timing of life events, ability to adapt career goals to the new situation, and impact of social contexts on family relations.

Key words: refugee family resettlement, life course perspective, agency, displacement and gender, young refugee mothers, biographic narratives.

1. Introduction

This article discusses results of a qualitative analysis based on biographic narratives of three young well-educated women from Syria, who arrived in the Netherlands between 2015 and 2017. Due to their specific stage in the life course, important life events and changes regarding their family coincide with main changes and requirements related to the building of a new life as a refugee in a host country. Balancing work and family life is challenging for many young parents and as such young Syrian women do not differ from their Dutch contemporaries. However, their circumstances are fundamentally different. Unlike Dutch young women, they have to get used to a new language, a new - highly complex - society, and they have to reformulate their goals and find new ways to achieve them. Moreover, they are cut off from extended family members and former social networks that used to support them.

The presented case studies are based on data from an ongoing five-year ethnographic research among Syrian (reunited) refugee families. Longitudinal qualitative research can
add to the understanding of subjective perceptions as well as sense-making and decision-making processes of people (Sleijpen et al. 2013; Bek-Pedersen/Montgomery 2006; McMichael et al. 2011). By focusing on the specific position of the women in the life course as well as on family dynamics that occur as a consequence of resettlement, this article aims to gain insights into ways in which young female refugees shape their agency towards (the combination of) a professional career and family responsibilities and how their agency develops.

In the following, I will first provide some background information about asylum policies and Syrian refugees in the Netherlands. Subsequently, I will explain the main theoretical concepts used in the article and refer to methodology. Then, I will describe the cases through the themes that appear from my analysis. Finally, I will discuss patterns that emerge when comparing the presented cases and will situate these patterns within the theoretical frame of the article.

2. Syrian refugee families in the Dutch context

As in other European countries, especially in the years 2015 and 2016, relatively large numbers of refugees from Syria arrived in the Netherlands. Since 2016, a rising number of them arrived in the context of family reunion (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2019). Family reunion migrants mostly receive their temporary residence permit soon after their arrival. Refugees with a temporary residence permit are not allowed to choose their place of residence. Dutch administration expects all municipalities to house a certain number of status holders and they are centrally allocated to a place of residence (Dagevos et al. 2018: 44; VluchtelingenWerk Nederland n.d.).

Adult refugees with a temporary residence permit have to participate in civic integration courses and to pass exams in language and knowledge about Dutch society and labour market within three years after the starting date of their temporary residence permit. Children of primary school age mostly join a language class, after which they can continue in Dutch elementary education; younger children can join a pre-school. In some municipalities, joining a regular school class and a language class can be combined. Minors between 12 and 18 usually first enter international transitional classes before they move into secondary or vocational education (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland n.d.).

The level of education of Syrian refugees in the Netherlands varies widely. Syrian refugees – both male and female – aged between 25 and 34 are the highest educated. Elderly people more often have lower or no educational qualifications. Young people under the age of 24 are also less likely to have a degree in higher education, as the war and the flight from Syria often interrupted their school careers (Dagevos et al. 2018: 95-107).

Currently, most Syrian refugees have a temporary residence permit for a period of five years. After that, they can apply for a permanent residence permit and then for Dutch nationality. However, they need to have fulfilled the civic integration requirements and their prospects depend on the assessment of the Dutch government concerning the safety situation in Syria at that moment (Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst 2019).