

A Celebration of Refugee Women in the Arab World

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In our hurried world, we often prove to be poor listeners and shallow observers. This is certainly true of our understanding of the plight, aspirations, and contributions of refugee women living in our midst. Public discourse about refugee women is often limited to pity and sympathy. In reality they remain hidden in the shadows of society. Unless one is invited into the private sanctuaries of their confidence, built to preserve their safety, they appear faceless and the breadth of their reality remains unknown. This, in spite of their fundamental role in society and their importance in the construction of a holistic future.

This edition of *Al-Raida* seeks to encourage better listening, observing, and understanding of the world of refugee women. It aims to bring into focus their strengths, the obstacles they face, and their coping strategies. It is our hope that throughout these pages, the human voice of the refugee woman can be heard and celebrated, in its many forms. To these ends, art, poetry, and narratives have been scattered between more formal academic reflections.

Refugee women are central to understanding the political, social, and economic turmoil in the Arab region, and as such deserve much more attention than commonly given. First and foremost, refugee women deserve attention as a basic response to their humanity. They are in many ways the human face of war, poverty, and discrimination, but also of hope and resilience. They are often identified as exceptionally vulnerable, experiencing the traumas of war, displacement, and gender-based violence. As such, they deserve increased protection and service. But they also act as the family protector and provider, the memory holder, and the builder of family, identity, and society. For this, they deserve better understanding, opportunities, and our admiration.

Articles were submitted to this edition of *Al-Raida* from diverse writers, contexts, and backgrounds. Interestingly, a natural cohesion exists between articles based on their mutual consideration of core issues. Perhaps the most common theme across the articles is the timeless struggle of refugee women to create and retain identity amid the competing need to both hold to the past and to exist in the present. Like all refugees, when refugee women flee their homes they leave behind complex social networks, traditions and rituals, identities, social recognition, and a way of life. As refugees, they may be thrust into new cultures and social systems. In these new environments, they may face discrimination, isolation, and poverty. Navigating these new complexities requires ingenuity and strength. In the context of Sudanese refugee women in Cairo, Mahmoud studies this tension, as manifested in three domains: the body, productivity, and the social sphere. Naguib, drawing on the narratives of two Palestinian women in Lebanon, illustrates women's ability to positively adapt to displacement and to overcome the fore mentioned tension by the recreation of home, memory, and identity. Analyzing Arab refugee women's location in the global feminist movement, Ossome identifies the opportunity in the identity crisis of Arab refugee women for

the reconciliation of feminism in the Arab world with the global feminist movement. Adding to the struggle to recreate an identity for themselves and their families, refugee women are often faced with shifting dynamics in the family and in gender roles. In some refugee situations, women may find employment easier and enjoy freer movement than men, thus changing their role in the public sphere, even becoming the primary 'bread-winner' for the family. Such changes are explored in various articles. Beydoun's article, for example, focuses on Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, and highlights changes in gender roles in displacement, notable in women/girls' increased responsibility and engagement at home and in the public sphere and decreased social capital/social networks. Interestingly, the articles suggest that women do not unilaterally embrace their increased voice in the family; stepping outside the house forces them into contact with unknown dynamics which threaten their identity and safety. As evidence to this, both Mahmoud and De Regt draw attention to women's feelings of frustration and degradation which result from being forced to work in jobs that they consider socially inferior. Similarly, De Regt finds that Somali refugee women in Yemen are thrust into the public sphere, in which they feel vulnerable. In her article, she suggests that this causes tension in the home because it forces men into an uncomfortable position of dependence.

Feeding these dynamics is a brutal reality: in many situations, refugee women experience multiple layers of discrimination. Not only are they faced with stigma and discrimination as refugees, they also struggle against social, cultural, and legal gender-based discrimination. This can result in violations of their basic human rights and frustrate attempts to satisfy basic needs. Ito's article describes the international and regional protection mechanisms which ensure refugee women's rights. Against this background, a number of the articles highlight critical deficiencies in national protection mechanisms, human rights violations, and continuing need. For example, Vine, Taskan, and Pepper's article considers the condition of displaced Kurdish women in Turkey, noting continued human rights violations. Similarly, Razavi and Schneider study Iraqi refugee women's access to basic reproductive health care in Iran and Jordan. They stress the long term consequences, for refugee women and for the region, of the inadequate provision of basic services.

The articles not only highlight the gendered experience of refugee women in the Arab world, they also draw attention to many of the refugee populations believed to be among the most vulnerable in the region: Palestinian refugees – the largest refugee crisis in the modern history of the Middle East; Iraqi refugees – a growing crisis surpassed only by the Palestinian refugee crisis; sub-Saharan African refugees in the Arab world (Somali and Sudanese)—who have not only fled extreme violence in their home countries, but are likely to face discrimination and neglect in their host-countries; and displaced Kurds—a historically marginalized population in the Arab world. These communities live on the edge of our society and consciousness, in the shadow of regional and national politics. They are a living testimony to the consequences of war and the human drive for survival.

Ultimately, this edition of *Al-Raida* is a call to action, both to assist the marginalized communities and to listen and learn from them. Refugee women are among the most vulnerable in our society but, as the articles show, they are also survivors, examples of the strength, courage, and adaptability of humans generally. We have much to learn from their stories and experiences.

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