Conditional Autonomy: Gender Transformation, Divorce, and Moral Regulation among Syrian Refugee Women in Germany

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Introduction

> “I did not get divorced to rest," Manal told me in a firm, steady voice. "I got divorced to live”.

Sitting across from me at her dining table in Cologne, Manal moved between pain, loss, and fragments of pride. Her story did not unfold as a simple narrative of liberation. Having left Syria with four children and rebuilt her life in Germany, she had gained something she had long been denied: the ability to decide for herself. Yet this autonomy came at a cost. After a long struggle to obtain a divorce, she faced familial judgment, social isolation, and the burden of redefining her role as a mother, a woman, and a member of her community.

This article is written for a special issue marking the 75th anniversary of the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Its connection to the Convention is not that the Convention can be expected to solve the intimate struggles that unfold inside families and refugee communities. Rather, it asks what becomes visible after legal protection has been granted. The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol remain the central international instruments defining refugee status and outlining the rights and obligations attached to protection (UNHCR, 2025). At its core is the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits returning refugees to places where their life or freedom would be threatened (UNHCR, 1997). For women like Manal, this legal protection matters because it creates the threshold of safety through which residence, courts, welfare institutions, education, language courses, and the possibility of independent life become accessible.

At the same time, Manal's story reveals the limits of a framework primarily concerned with legal status and state responsibility. The Convention can protect refugees from return and establish basic rights, but it cannot by itself protect women from moral surveillance within their own communities, the stigma of divorce, emotional isolation, or the loss of belonging that may accompany autonomy. These are not failures of the Convention in a narrow legal sense. They expose a wider political gap between formal protection and lived protection.

Despite extensive scholarship on migration and integration, less attention has been paid to the intimate transformations that occur within refugee families. Much research focuses on economic inclusion, legal status, or psychological trauma, while overlooking how displacement reshapes gendered relationships, emotional life, and moral belonging within everyday interactions (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021). Existing research has shown that migration can alter household power relations, increase women’s economic participation, and

reshape gendered roles (Benería et al., 2012; Kofman, 2000), while forced displacement disrupts kinship structures and produces new forms of dependency and emotional strain (Alhanouti, 2025; Eastmond, 2007).

This article argues that forced displacement produces not only new opportunities for autonomy but also new regimes of moral visibility and social regulation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with fourteen Syrian refugee women in Germany between 2022 and 2024, it examines how gender transformation unfolds as an ambivalent process of empowerment and constraint. Manal's story serves as a prototypical case through which these dynamics become visible.

Methodology

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2022 and 2024 with fourteen Syrian refugee women living in Germany. Data collection included repeated semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation in domestic and community settings. The longitudinal design made it possible to capture evolving experiences of marriage, divorce, motherhood, social belonging, and moral regulation over time.

Manal was selected as a prototypical case because her narrative reflects key patterns identified across the broader dataset: marital breakdown, negotiation of autonomy, shifting parental authority, and social reconfiguration within refugee communities. The article does not present her story as representative in a statistical sense. Instead, it uses her account to illuminate a broader relational pattern shared, with variations, by many of the women I accompanied.

My positionality as a Syrian refugee and mother was central to the methodology. Shared cultural and biographical reference points facilitated trust and access, enabling participants to speak openly about sensitive topics such as domestic conflict, sexuality, divorce, and family pressure. At the same time, this proximity required continuous reflexivity. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymization, and careful handling of sensitive material to prevent social harm within closely connected communities.

Gender Norms, Patriarchy and Marriage

For many Syrian refugee women, displacement to Germany constitutes not only a geographic relocation but a profound rupture in social, familial, and gendered life courses (Christ & Etzold, 2022). Legal frameworks, social norms, and cultural expectations intersect in ways that both enable and constrain women's autonomy, producing tensions that are often most visible within intimate relationships (Anthias, 2012). Manal's story exemplifies these processes, illustrating how newly accessible freedoms collide with internalized norms and longstanding social pressures.

Prior to displacement, Manal's life in Syria was structured by patriarchal authority and rigid social expectations. Decisions regarding her mobility, social interactions, and marital obligations were closely monitored by both her husband and extended family. Her experiences reflect broader patterns observed among the women in this study: gendered constraints limited access to independent economic participation, legal rights, and personal decision-making, particularly around marriage, sexuality, and social visibility.

For many Syrian women, marriage is not only a private relationship but a social institution embedded in kinship, honour, and collective reputation. In Manal's case, marriage was arranged at the age of seventeen to her cousin, reflecting broader patterns in Arab and conservative family contexts where early marriage may be shaped by family strategy, kinship expectations, and social reputation rather than individual choice (Rashad et al., 2005).

> “I was very happy when I got married. It was a dream that I had been raised for. It was the dream of all girls and just another part of the life my parents prepared me for. I did not imagine that my whole world would change overnight”.

For twenty-three years, like many other women I met during fieldwork, Manal remained in a marriage that was emotionally empty and often painful. Her husband fulfilled what was socially expected of him financially, but he offered little emotional care, affection, or meaningful presence. What held the marriage together was not love, but obligation: toward children, toward family, and toward a social image that could hardly be broken. I was beaten several times, but I could not react", she recalled quietly. Then continued:

> "One time, I went to my parents' house, crying, telling them everything. But they silenced me and sent me back immediately. They told me, 'We do not have divorced women in our family. If you divorce, you will destroy the reputation of your sisters and your daughters.' After that, I never complained again. Whatever happened, I stayed silent. I learned how to avoid conflict with him.”

The personal pain and the weight of carrying the social order was a hidden burden that many Syrian women bore for years without being able to articulate it. In many families, a woman's endurance is tied to the honour of the entire household (Bromfield et al., 2016; Rashad et al., 2005). Marriage is a public symbol of stability, morality, and respectability. Divorce is therefore not seen only as an individual decision, but as a rupture that echoes across generations (Anser, 2013; Bromfield et al., 2016).

As Suad Joseph (1996) has shown, women are often positioned as bearers of family honour, where silence and sacrifice become moral expectations rather than personal choices. What Manal experienced was not only control from her husband, but from an internalized system of authority that reached into her parents' home. Even in moments of visible harm, the priority was not her safety, but the preservation of family reputation.

Encountering Freedom

Migration to Germany brought Manal into a new social and legal environment, radically different from her prior context. After joining language and integration courses, she gradually became aware of civil law and her rights in the new country. Germany did not only change Manal's legal position; it slowly began to reshape her understanding of herself.

Previously unnoticeable moments in her marriage started to echo loudly in her soul. The damage and humiliation that she had endured for years became unbearable within a new legal structure that recognized her right to live independently, free from total dependency on her husband, family, or community. She began to observe more closely and think differently: the way other women spoke freely, the absence of constant social surveillance, and the realization that her choices were no longer immediately corrected by family members. She told: "I felt like a child going to school for the first time."

Living in this new atmosphere, Manal was not only learning a language or navigating a new society. She was slowly learning how to think beyond the boundaries that had defined her life for decades. For the first time, she found herself considering changes in her lifestyle without the same immediate fear. Questions she had buried for years began to surface: questions about love, dignity, and what it meant to live a life that felt truly hers. The boundaries that once seemed fixed and unquestionable started to loosen.

Yet this process was neither immediate nor easy. The desire to live differently emerged alongside fear, hesitation, and uncertainty. As women like Manal begin to see themselves differently, marriages once sustained by silence and endurance become increasingly difficult to maintain in their previous form. What had been tolerated before becomes questioned. In this way, freedom does not simply offer new choices; it transforms perception itself. Once this shift occurs, returning to the old structure of life becomes almost impossible.

Gendered Transformation and Marital Rupture

The transformation that Manal began was not simply about adapting to new values in Germany. It was about questioning the traditions that had shaped her life for so long. What had once been normalized and silenced became increasingly difficult to accept. The more she became aware of her rights, the more she became aware of what she had been denied. She stated:

> "I first thought about taking off my hijab. I had always hated it, but my husband refused to let me remove it. This time, I was determined to take this step. For the first time, I challenged him. One day, as I was going to my language course, I took it off. And that is when all the problems started. He became furious. He could not believe what I had done. He called me a whore".

Taking off the hijab was not only an act of personal choice; it was a step Manal was willing to take to challenge the traditions that had long shaped and constrained her life. This moment marked a visible shift, one she had been quietly preparing for over time. Yet it did not pass without consequence. It quickly became a source of confrontation with her husband and later extended into tensions within her wider family. Still, Manal chose to stand by her decision.

What unfolded was not simply a disagreement over appearance, but a deeper struggle over authority, control, and the right to define oneself within intimate relations. In this sense, the hijab becomes less the issue itself and more a site through which gendered power relations, dependency structures, and long-established expectations are negotiated and contested. This resonates with scholarship that understands agency not as simple resistance or liberation, but as a practice embedded within power relations and social norms (Kandiyoti, 1991; Mahmood, 2006).

Within this shifting context, what began as a personal decision gradually became a turning point that exposed accumulated tensions within the marriage. The question of appearance transformed into a question of control, and eventually into a deeper fracture in the relationship. Divorce was not a sudden event, but the formalization of a longer process of separation that had already unfolded emotionally and socially within the relationship.

The divorce marked an important turning point in Manal's life because it finalized the breakdown of the marital structure that had previously defined her social and familial position. However, rather than resolving the tensions that preceded it, this moment opened a new phase of experience in which the consequences of her decisions became more visible in her wider social world.

Social Negotiation and Community Regulation

Following divorce, Manal's autonomy expanded but also became socially constrained. Within her refugee community, divorced women are often subject to moral surveillance and implicit exclusion, particularly when their behaviour challenges expectations of femininity and motherhood (Ajlan, 2022). Manal further stated:

> “After divorce I started dating, but I never go to places where people that I know might see me. I cannot do this openly. I do not want my daughters or family to know about that; they already disagreed with my decision to divorce”.

Following the divorce, the consequences of Manal's earlier transformation became increasingly embedded in her everyday social relations. What had begun as a shift within intimate marital dynamics unfolded into a broader reconfiguration of her position within family and community structures. In this regard, divorce illustrates how gender transformations upon displacement are

not confined to the private sphere, but extend into the social fields that regulate manners, visibility, and recognition. She said firmly:

> "Now, I become very selective regarding with whom I interact. I want to live for myself now, but I also do not want to lose my children or be blamed by society".

Within her community network, Manal's changing role as a divorced and increasingly autonomous woman was not interpreted in isolation. It was read in relation to broader concerns about gendered expectations and the intergenerational transmission of values. Her growing independence was therefore not only understood as a personal trajectory, but also as a potential disruption to established ideas of femininity, motherhood, and social continuity. This generated anxieties around moral influence, particularly regarding how children within the family might come to understand gender roles and future life possibilities.

At the level of the refugee women's community, similar dynamics became visible. Gender norms continued to function as a form of social regulation, shaping which female life trajectories were considered legitimate, respectable, or socially acceptable. Within this moral framework, divorce and visible autonomy became socially meaningful markers that could reposition women within networks of solidarity and belonging. As a result, Manal's social relations became increasingly selective and fragile, reflecting a form of conditional inclusion shaped by gendered expectations.

Motherhood and Relational Autonomy

Although Manal gained legal authority over her children, her narrative reveals that motherhood in exile is shaped by emotional labour and constant negotiation. "I give her freedom at home, but not outside. I am afraid.", Manal told.

Such accounts demonstrate that freedom is not simply expanded through migration, but redistributed across new forms of responsibility and risk. Autonomy is therefore inseparable from care work, emotional regulation, and social vigilance (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al., 2021).

At the same time, increased autonomy can intensify social precarity. Divorced women like Manal may face subtle exclusion within diasporic networks where ideals of family continuity and moral respectability remain influential (Foner & Alba, 2008; Peek, 2005). Her selective participation in community life reflects an effort to maintain independence while navigating these normative pressures. Manal stated that:

> "Though I feel proud of myself, my children always blame me because I left their father. People are still watching and talking about everything that happens here".

This tension underscores the ambivalent nature of gender transformation in exile: freedom enables new forms of self-definition, yet simultaneously produces conditions of visibility in which women remain socially evaluated and morally positioned. Gendered agency, in this sense, is always relationally constrained.

Manal's story, while singular in detail, reflects broader patterns identified across fieldwork with fourteen Syrian refugee women between 2022 and 2024. Across cases, participants described similar tensions between legal autonomy, shifting family authority, and persistent social expectations. Using Manal as a prototypical case allows these intersecting dynamics - divorce, parental negotiation, and community regulation - to be understood as part of a broader process of gender transformation upon displacement, where freedom remains continuously negotiated rather than fully achieved.

Discussion: Formal Protection and Lived Protection

Manal's story, situated within the accounts of the fourteen women I accompanied during this research, illustrates the ambivalent nature of freedom for Syrian refugee women in Germany. Displacement opens opportunities for legal, economic, and social autonomy that were previously constrained by patriarchal norms, marital hierarchies, and restrictive moral codes. Divorce, independent decision-making, and selective engagement in intimate relationships provide women with forms of agency that may have been difficult or impossible to exercise before displacement. Yet, as Manal's experiences demonstrate, these freedoms are never unqualified. They carry profound social, emotional, and relational costs.

Her careful negotiation of desire, parental authority, and community belonging shows that autonomy in exile is deeply relational. Freedom is exercised not only for oneself but in constant attention to children, family expectations, and social norms. In this sense, freedom is both empowering and burdensome: it offers agency while simultaneously generating vulnerability.

This is where the article speaks directly to the anniversary theme of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The Convention matters because it creates the legal ground from which women like Manal can begin to rebuild life after displacement. The rights attached to refugee protection - including access to courts, education, wage-earning employment, documentation, and public relief - are crucial because they make autonomy legally possible (UNHCR, 2025). Without protection from return and access to institutions in the host country, the questions at the heart of this article - divorce, motherhood, dignity, and self-definition - would remain overshadowed by insecurity and displacement.

At the same time, the women's stories reveal the limits of legal protection when it is not accompanied by gender-sensitive social support. The Convention was never designed to regulate intimate family life or transform community norms. Its limitation, therefore, should not be understood as a failure to directly protect women from gossip, loneliness, or divorce

stigma. Rather, the political limitation lies in the gap between formal protection and lived protection. Gender-related persecution has had to be addressed through later interpretive guidance because gender was not explicitly named as a Convention ground in the original text (UNHCR, 2002).

The article therefore does not argue that the Refugee Convention failed because it did not solve Manal's intimate struggles. Instead, it shows what remains politically unfinished after legal protection has been granted. Refugee protection must not end at the border, the asylum decision, or the residence permit. It also requires accessible legal information, gender-sensitive counselling, support for single mothers, safe spaces for women, community-based dialogue, and institutional awareness of the social risks that may follow women's autonomy. These measures do not replace the Convention; they build around it.

Manal's experiences resonate with patterns observed across the broader fieldwork with fourteen Syrian women. While each woman's journey is unique, common themes emerge: the collision of internalized gender norms with host-country legal rights, the restructuring of intimate and parental roles, and the delicate balance between asserting autonomy and maintaining social acceptance. Freedom, then, is not a linear trajectory toward empowerment. It is a socially negotiated and emotionally costly process.

This study underscores the need for nuanced understandings of refugee women's experiences, moving beyond binary notions of empowerment and marginalization. Policies and interventions should recognize that legal rights and economic opportunities are only part of the picture. Equally important are parenting support, legal counselling, psychosocial services, and community-based approaches that challenge the isolation of divorced and single women without exposing them to further stigma.

Ultimately, Manal's story challenges simplistic narratives of emancipation. Liberation in exile can coexist with loneliness, moral tension, and social risk. By centering her lived experience, this article highlights the complex realities of gender transformation in forced migration, offering insights for scholarship, policy, and practice in refugee integration and gendered migration studies.

Conclusion

This article has examined how forced displacement reshapes gender relations among Syrian refugee women in Germany through processes that simultaneously enable autonomy and produce new forms of social constraint. Drawing on the case of Manal, situated within broader ethnographic fieldwork with fourteen Syrian women, it has shown that migration does not simply expand individual freedoms, but fundamentally reconfigures the social conditions under which gendered life courses are lived, interpreted, and regulated.

The analysis demonstrates that legal and structural transformations in Germany - particularly access to divorce, independent legal status, welfare institutions, language courses, and expanded social participation - create new possibilities for women to renegotiate marital roles, motherhood, and intimate relationships. However, these formal rights do not translate into unambiguous emancipation. They unfold within enduring moral frameworks shaped by family expectations, community norms, and ideals of femininity, respectability, and maternal responsibility.

Manal's trajectory illustrates this tension. Her separation and pursuit of an autonomous life enabled her to reclaim agency over her identity and everyday choices. At the same time, it generated new forms of vulnerability expressed through social distancing, moral judgment, and strained familial relations.

In relation to the 75th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the article shows both the enduring importance and the limits of refugee protection. The Convention matters because it provides the legal foundation through which Syrian women in exile can claim safety, residence, and access to rights. Yet these stories also show that formal refugee protection does not automatically become lived protection. For divorced and autonomous refugee women, the struggle often begins after legal safety has been secured: in the family, in the community, and in the everyday negotiation of dignity, motherhood, and belonging.

The findings challenge linear narratives of emancipation in migration studies. Rather than producing a clear shift from constraint to freedom, gender transformation in exile emerges as a relational process in which autonomy is continuously shaped and limited by social recognition and moral evaluation. Freedom, in this sense, is not the absence of constraint, but its reconfiguration within new legal and social environments.

Ultimately, the article shows that forced displacement produces a paradoxical condition: while it expands opportunities for gendered agency, it also intensifies the social visibility and moral regulation of women's choices. Recognizing this ambivalence is essential for understanding refugee women's lives beyond binary framings of empowerment and oppression. A gender-sensitive politics of refugee protection must therefore ask not only whether women are protected from return, but whether they are supported in living freely, safely, and with social recognition after refuge has been granted.

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Endnotes

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