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# Conflict-driven social change: the case of Syrian children and youth

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For Syrian children, the civil war which emerged as a consequence of the Arab Spring has driven massive social change both at the structural level of legal, socioeconomic, educational and health systems, and at the intimate heart of everyday family life. This paper reviews recent research to understand the nature and impact of conflict-driven social change on children's lives. Research from the region and Western resettlement contexts indicates that Syrian refugee children have experienced high levels of exposure to conflict-related traumatic events and elevated rates of mental health difficulties, with evidence to suggest that adolescent girls in the region exhibit poorer well-being than boys. The research captures the social destruction experienced by children and families, and the adaptations forced by survival and protection needs to pre-conflict age, gender and family role norms.

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## Introduction

Unrest in Syria, a consequence of the Arab Spring, has led to one of the bloodiest civil wars in the Middle East with profound consequences for children's lives. For displaced and refugee Syrian children and youth, civil war has meant human devastation [1]. Since 2011, political violence in Syria has created the largest refugee crisis in the world. Over 5.5 million Syrian refugees have crossed national borders to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. Children make up half this displaced population. By 2019, over one million Syrian refugee babies were born in countries in the region [2]. Regional resettlement, for many Syrian refugees, is a liminal status as many have had to relocate multiple times [3], are unable to return home, and are prevented from or are unwilling to make their current place of abode their long-term home. In 2019, UN

High Commission for Refugees relocated 24 700 refugees from Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to a third country in Canada, Australia and Europe and these individuals are afforded full legal protection as official refugees [4]. Whether in the region or in high income countries in the West, refugee Syrian children and adolescents face a changed life course from the life they and their parents imagined. This article takes a sociocultural psychology perspective on the lifecourse [5] that positions change as a reconfiguration of person–social world–environment dynamics. For many Syrian children and adolescents, the conflict has sparked 'intransitive change' [5], that is, a form of change where there is a rupture in experience from which there is no going back and which requires a re-negotiation of one's relationship to the social world and environment. This article reviews literature predominantly from the two-year period January 2018–January 2020 to understand children's changing experiences and trajectories in families and communities that are simultaneously changing as a result of conflict, displacement and resettlement.

## Conflict-driven lifecourse changes Rupture and social change

Precarity is at the heart of the experiences of Syrian refugee children and their families. Drivers of social change are factors at structural and institutional levels that determine the conditions of everyday life, including legal status and related to this, the right to access health services, education, housing and employment. Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon are without legal status [6]. In Turkey, refugees are only granted temporary stay pending resettlement [7]. In Lebanon, Syrian refugee fathers have legally restricted labour opportunities, resulting in labour exploitation and changes to gender and age roles in families as more women and children are forced to work [8]. Syrian adolescents in Lebanese urban areas live in poor, crowded housing conditions with inadequate water supply [9]. An analysis of the relationship between displacement and child labour in rural Lebanon found that 97.7% of families lived in makeshift tents, 74% of households were food insecure, and 54.6% of household heads did not work. Female headed households (29.1%) had a larger income-expenditure gap and greater food insecurity [10]. In the region, education has been severely disrupted or curtailed, especially for adolescents [11]. In Lebanon, Syrian refugee children aged 10–16 years experienced financial barriers to enrolment, an unfamiliar curriculum, and perceived in-class mistreatment [9]. Everyday practices are severely disrupted and children's

autonomy, experienced as having control over one's life conditions, is highly constrained.

### **What is the impact and experience of social change for children and adolescents?**

Syrian refugee children have experienced high levels of exposure to war-related traumatic events, with studies reporting a mean of between four and five traumatic events [12,13\*,14\*]. Over 90% of children had experienced armed conflict in Syria [13\*] including gun shooting or blasts [15] and 60% had seen someone kicked, shot or physically hurt [16]. In Turkey, 71.9% of Syrian refugee children witnessed the violent death of a familiar person, 73% saw dead or severely wounded people and 42.2% had a history of mistreatment by others [15]. Also in Turkey, 60.3% of Syrian children reported having experienced events they thought posed a threat to self or others and over half (52.3%) experienced the loss of someone whom they really cared about [13\*]. Boys reported more exposure to war experiences than girls [17].

In the two year time period of studies reviewed, between a third and a half of displaced and refugee Syrian children in the region scored above the clinical cut-off score for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomology [13\*,18,19]. Similarly, 32%–48% had depressive symptoms [15,18]. A dose-response association was evident in a number of studies. Among Syrian children in a Turkish camp, the total number of traumatic events correlated significantly with depression [12]. In Lebanon and Jordan, Syrian children who reported higher levels of exposure to war-related trauma were more likely to show greater prevalence of emotional dysregulation and PTSD [19]. Chen *et al.* [14\*] sought to unravel the impact of different aspects of displacement on executive function among 12–18 year old Syrian refugees living in Jordan. They found poverty but not levels of traumatic events, PTSD or insecurity was associated with poorer executive functioning, suggesting differential impact of specific conflict-related stressors on children.

Across a number of studies, gender was significantly related to psychological outcomes with adolescent girls in particular evidencing poorer well-being. Girls reported a greater appraisal of danger, more internalising and post-traumatic stress symptoms [17], higher mean depression and anxiety scores [15], and higher PTSD symptoms [18] than boys. In Turkey, Oppedal *et al.* [12] found that girls aged 13 years and older reported more depression than boys but this gender difference was not witnessed among younger children. In formal and informal Syrian schooling children aged 7–18 years in Jordan and Lebanon, no significant association was found between PTSD and gender [19]. PTSD symptomology and emotional dysregulation significantly decreased the longer children were resettled in Lebanon and Jordan, although the prevalence of PTSD was higher for those resettled in Lebanon as a

result of the greater economic, legal and security problems faced by Syrian refugees in that country [19]. However this decrease in symptomology over time may be supported by the fact children were attending schools, something not necessarily typical of older children in both countries.

### **How does social change reconfigure person–social world–environment dynamics?**

Displacement as a result of war has dramatically changed family roles and practices. In refugee contexts, Syrian refugee families in urban areas and camp settlements are living in overcrowded accommodation characterised by a lack of privacy which impacts intimacy and parental marital relations, results in changed family dynamics [9], and higher interpersonal conflict [20]. As a result of feeling strained, parents were reported to be less available to their children [9]. Among Syrian refugee children in Turkey, four fifths (81.2%) of children reported their parents' manners had changed unfavourably towards them in resettlement [15]. Displaced mothers in Turkey and Syria reported more discipline problems in their children due to children spending time unsupervised at home due to parental work absences [21]. Interviews with Syrian parents and their children in Lebanon found parents' diminished capacity to meet children's survival needs of shelter, food and health led to negatively impaired parent–child interactions while parental psychological distress contributed to harsh parenting [22]. Interestingly, in a related study, poorer maternal mental health was associated with greater use of harsher punishment but not rejection [23] indicating an adaptation of parenting practices to a displaced environment characterised by insecurity and risk for children. Displacement involves a re-figuring of parent–child relations as parents experienced a crisis of competence as providers and protectors for their children while children felt it was their role to be responsible for the family [24]. Akesson and Sousa [24] quoted a parent noting “There's confusion. As a child, like, they are starting to think like adults” (p.1269).

Refugee parental agency is ‘thin’ agency, that is, the capacity to act is highly constrained [25], and involves strategies such as keeping children close, comforting and distracting them, keeping a focus on a more positive future [24], and staying connected with family in Syria and in exile [26]. Parents feel they have to protect their children from how bad they feel so as not to let their bad mood affect their children [24]. El Khani and Peters [21] found that parents tried to understand the changes they witnessed in their children reporting “I don't blame them, they are mostly sad . . . Their trust in life was broken, my husband says it's not our fault, we didn't do anything wrong. They used to have a good life and now it was dragged away from them” (p. 38). The accumulating evidence shows that both parents and children are trying to modify their behaviour to protect and support each

other, that each is changed by the conditions of war and displacement and they are reciprocally adapting to each other and navigating the changes in their relationships.

### **What is the interplay between developmental trajectories and social change?**

Conflict and displacement have resulted in shifts in the social category of ‘child’. Restrictions on the ability of men to work, combined with lower rates of school participation, has forced many children to work earlier than was the case in Syria [9,27–29]. In a Lebanese survey of over four thousand Syrian child labourers aged 8–18 years, 91% cited war as their reason for moving to Lebanon, 84.5% of those who went to school in Syria no longer went to school in Lebanon and 96.3% reported their first child labour experience was after arrival in Lebanon, precipitated by the economic precarity of their families [28]. Syrian refugee children worked hard, often in the agricultural sector. Girls, compared to boys, worked longer hours in the sun and were less likely to receive their wages on time while boys engaged in more heavy lifting [30]. In a study of Syrian refugee young boys working in the Lebanese scrap metal industry, boys were aware they were labelled as ‘nawar’, a disparaging label with connotations of being unclean or dishonorable [31]. Boys talked about growing up being told by Lebanese neighbours that Syrian bodies “can sustain work under all conditions, including filth and extreme temperatures” (p.6) which they resisted through playfulness, irony and imagining a brighter, post-conflict future [31]. In Lebanon and Turkey, Syrian children and youth experienced their identity positioned as the “aliens of the century” (p.32) [1]. They faced discriminatory acts such as humiliation, ostracism, and rejection by peers or indifference and apathy by the general public [32]. This points to a core challenge for Syrian refugee adolescents; how to reconfigure a successful adult identity in displacement when both age norms, identity and culturally structured and supported pathways to adulthood have changed?

This is no less of a challenge for girls and young women, who also face changing trajectories as a result of displacement. Marriage, a culturally normative event for young men and women, now seems to be driven less by customary factors and more by displacement-related factors with different gendered outcomes. Poverty, disrupted education, insecurity, and protection-related factors act as drivers of a reduced age of marriage for Syrian refugee girls and young women [33–36,37\*,38,39] while conversely, economic precarity is a disincentive to early marriage for young men [40]. There are also important gender differences in protection-related perceptions; married girls, unmarried girls and Syrian mothers differed from married men, unmarried men and Syrian fathers on perceptions of protection of girls, with females more likely to report that girls were protected too much while in contrast, men were more likely to report that Syrian

girls were not protected enough [37\*]. In a patriarchal society where family honour is an important value, a male perspective on female protection is more likely to have weight in family decision-making related to restricting female mobility outside the home and on early marriage. Thus, there may be tensions within families on the most appropriate adaptive protection strategies for girls and young women to changed environments.

### **Syrian refugee children and social change in high income contexts**

As in the region, studies reviewed in the time period showed that Syrian refugee children in high income western contexts had elevated rates of mental health difficulties. Syrian refugee children showed increased anxiety and PTSD symptoms two years after leaving the conflict zone and one month after arrival in USA [41]. Furthermore, all measures of maternal, but not paternal, symptom severity were associated with anxiety symptom severity in children [41]. Recently arrived Syrian adolescents to a refugee camp in Europe had higher expectations and fewer psychological problems than children aged 12–18 years who had lived in the camp for a longer period of up to two years [17], indicating a worsening of mental health over time. As was the case in the region [1,32], Syrian refugee children and youth in Canada reported experiences of discrimination, bullying and racism [42], setting up a possible life course trajectory of future exclusion in high income counties in the West [43]. By contrast, Ruis [44] gives an example of how young Syrian refugee women in the Netherlands engage in agentic projects of work and family formation that portrays their adaptation to and engagement with their resettlement context.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the review above, it is clear that the civil war in Syria, ignited as a consequence of the Arab Spring, has inexorably changed the lifecourse of Syrian refugee children and adolescents in ways previously unimaginable to them. The emotional climate of reception both in the region and high-income countries is challenging for children’s identity development, and is setting up a lifecourse trajectory of exclusion. There are a number of understudied areas in the literature including a consideration of parent-infant mental health and future trajectories of the one million babies born in the region, many of whom are at risk of statelessness. Similarly, Syrian children caught in transit in Greece and Italy are invisible and receive no legal recognition and protection [45]. Children and youth with chronic illnesses and disabilities need specialist provisioning to achieve their potential and their needs are understudied [46,47] as are those of Syrian youth who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender [48]. Promising interventions to support mental health are emerging [49\*,52] including comprehensive, preventative interventions [50\*] and the innovative use of technology in

intervention [51,52]. There is a need for further research that engages with Syrian children and adolescents own subjectivities.

### Author contribution statement

A.V. designed the project, conducted the literature search and review, and wrote the manuscript.

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### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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