

“Men Are Worth No More Than a Shoe Here”: Syrian Refugee Fathers Navigating Loss of Identity After Displacement in Germany

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Abstract: *The emotional toll of forced displacement on Syrian refugee fathers is profound yet often overlooked. Once regarded as breadwinners and decision-makers, these men find themselves uprooted not only from their homes but also from the foundations of their identities. In Germany, familiar responsibilities are replaced with unfamiliar systems that erode their masculinity—long tied in Syrian and Arab family systems to breadwinning, authority, and decision-making—and leave many adrift in a society where their previous roles no longer carry weight. Meanwhile, women and children adapt faster, accelerating a shift in family roles. This transition creates unbalanced forms of power within refugee families, leaving fathers feeling powerless. Caught between past status and the reality of diminished roles, many suffer silently from exclusion. Drawing on interviews and fieldwork, this paper reveals these hidden struggles, shedding light on refugee fathers’ emotional challenges and quiet attempts to restore dignity in the aftermath of displacement.*

INTRODUCTION

Displacement does not only take away a home. It reshapes lives, tears apart identities, and turns family roles upside down.¹ When families are forcibly displaced due to war, they are suddenly faced with several, usually overwhelming, daily challenges. The social norms, family values, and daily traditions they encounter often clash with those of their homeland, sweeping away the sense of familiarity and structure that once constructed their lives.

Before displacement, Syrian fathers provided, led, and cared for their families. Their role extended beyond financial responsibilities to include moral guidance and support, as they embodied authority, respect, and stability within both the household and broader society. Displacement, however, stripped them of these long-standing roles. It was not only about losing a career or a home; it struck at the heart of their dignity and self-worth. Many fathers found themselves unable to provide, guide, or protect as they once did, and struggled to navigate

both the practical and emotional challenges of their new lives in Germany. These challenges became most visible in the daily demands of integration. Learning a new language, adapting to unfamiliar institutions, and accepting jobs far below their previous qualifications left many fathers isolated and uncertain.² Their weakened position in exile not only undermined their authority but also distanced them from the family life that had once defined their role. In the meantime, children and mothers often adapted more quickly to social changes.³ This gradual shift meant that they assumed responsibilities traditionally held by fathers. While often necessary for survival in exile, these changes came with costs: family systems maintained for generations were destabilized as familiar roles and sources of authority were disrupted. The impact, however, was not equal across households; the experience of displacement varied depending on established family dynamics and individual circumstances.

My findings show that factors such as the family’s financial situation, religious orientation, and educational background strongly influence how roles are redefined and responsibilities redistributed. For many Syrian fathers in Germany, however, these shifts deeply unsettled their sense of self and masculinity, as spouses and children—adapting more quickly—reshaped household power. The result was often emotional strain and a profound sense of isolation that echoed through the family and into broader experiences of integration.

Displacement strips many fathers of the roles that once gave them pride and social worth, leaving

them unable to fulfil expectations that had long defined them. This rupture creates a deep crisis of identity. In many Middle Eastern contexts, masculinity is closely tied to being the breadwinner, the protector, and the head of the household.⁴

During my PhD fieldwork, I spent extensive time with Syrian refugee men living in Germany. Many reflected on the profound sense of helplessness and frustration that came with losing their standing within the family. While each family member faced daily challenges in different ways, fathers' voices were especially marked by depression, silence, and regret. They described the pain of losing their careers, social status, and, above all, the identity they had long relied upon. Among the fathers I interviewed, Sameer's story⁵ vividly illustrates this disruption. Before displacement, Sameer led a stable life with a secure financial situation, a good educational background, and a happy marriage. His story exemplifies the experiences of numerous Syrian refugee fathers who held similar roles and responsibilities in their households before the war, highlighting the stark contrast between past stability and current challenges in exile.

"All fathers are worth no more than a shoe here," Sameer explains. In Arab culture, the shoe often symbolizes low status and disrespect; being compared to a shoe conveys humiliation and being degraded, and brought down to the ground, stripped of value and dignity. His words capture the profound erosion of authority, social standing, and purpose that many fathers experience after displacement, leaving them feeling invisible and devalued. Sameer's experience, while deeply personal, exemplifies the broader challenges faced by Syrian fathers when the roles that once defined their masculinity and sense of self are overturned in exile.

The following interview is one of 14 I conducted with refugee fathers in Germany as part of my PhD research, which explored the transformations of family dynamics for Syrian refugees following displacement. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, the language I share with the participants. Being from Syria myself allowed me to build trust

and grasp the indirect hints in their stories. The interview has been anonymised to protect his identity. My analysis applies a gender perspective and a figurational approach to understand how roles, responsibilities, and power dynamics are renegotiated within displaced families.

STRANGERS AT HOME

"I: How are you doing?

Sameer: At home, like a woman, I have nothing to do. It is very cold here; I stay at home all the time.

I: Yes, we are blessed to be here to have the heating. In Aleppo, it is freezing there, and they have nothing to heat on.

Sameer: I never contact anybody there anymore.

I: Ya, me too, but I still read their posts on Facebook.

Sameer: I don't log in to Facebook anymore. I don't read the news at all. Everything causes me pain, deep pain that keeps growing day by day. I just stopped all kinds of contact with people and on digital media. I can't take it anymore."

This conversation with Sameer took place during one of my visits to his home. I initially became acquainted with the family through his wife at a contact café for refugees, where we met several times and gradually built a relationship of trust. Through these meetings, I was able to gain her confidence, which later allowed me to visit the family at home, interview them, and engage closely with Sameer. Over time, these encounters provided me with a deeper understanding of his experiences and the opportunity to hear his story firsthand. During these visits, it became clear that Sameer was largely isolated and reluctant to meet anyone outside his home, reflecting his depression and profound sense of disconnection. His withdrawal from social contact, including avoiding communication with friends and family in Aleppo, underscores the emotional toll that displacement has taken on him.

Sameer is a computer engineer—or rather, was, as he always corrects me. Before the war engulfed

Aleppo, he lived a steady and dignified life with his wife and two teenage children. He ran his own successful engineering company while his wife pursued her studies in law at the university. Their children were enrolled in a private international school, reflecting the stability and opportunities the family enjoyed. Sameer was in his early fifties at the time I interviewed him. The family came to Germany six years ago. However, when the war reached their home, it tore through everything Sameer had built. In a matter of days, the plans, the career, and the progress he had spent years nurturing were swept away—leaving only fragments of a life that once felt secure and stable.

"As we arrived in Germany, I thought these hardships are only temporary. I said to myself, 'Give me one year, and I will learn the language, I will find a job. But months passed, then years passed, and nothing changed. Everything is just getting more complicated. I tried everything, but they said I wasn't young enough to get a proper job. I went to different jobs, very low ones, just to stay active, thinking that this would lead me to something better, but it didn't. I apply for more than 5 jobs every day, but no one replies. I knew things were going to be hard here, and I was prepared to face all the hardships, but I failed. Life here is much harder than I expected."

After arriving in Germany, Sameer—like many other fathers—was determined to rebuild a life resembling the one he had back home. Yet, the reality of integration quickly proved more challenging than he had anticipated. Highly skilled refugees like Sameer often face job downgrading or are placed in roles far below their previous professional status, a situation that not only undermines their identity but also diminishes their socio-economic standing.⁶ Moreover, refugees often face de-qualification and multiple obstacles to integration: their professional credentials are rarely recognized, language barriers persist, and access to meaningful work is limited. These challenges disrupt not only their careers but also the daily

routines, responsibilities, and sense of purpose that once structured their lives and shaped their identity, self-worth, and dignity.⁷

"I used to be a happy person. Now the only wish I have is to die. I just think of dying. Every day when I go to bed, I wish I would never wake up the next day."

Through her faster acquisition of German and progress at school, Sameer's wife gradually became more skilled at navigating the new system while Sameer struggled to find a proper job to restore his self-worth and dignity. As her skills and confidence grew, she increasingly assumed responsibilities within the household, taking on tasks that had once been Sameer's domain. This gradual shift altered household dynamics, reducing Sameer's authority and reshaping the family's power structure. What began as a necessary adaptation to survive in exile became a profound reversal of household power. Sameer, once the family's anchor and decision-maker, found his role increasingly diminished. Witnessing his wife and children taking the lead in areas he had once mastered deepened his feelings of helplessness and loss of status, reflecting a pattern shared by many refugee fathers whose displacement undermined both their social and familial authority.

"My children do not ask for my advice anymore. They come to me only when they need my signature. I feel like a stranger in my own home. They are building their new life, and I am standing aside, watching and doing nothing."

Back at home, his position and influence were built not only on hard work but also on a deep understanding of cultural traditions, social norms, and local networks that allowed him to navigate opportunities with ease. These factors had earned him recognition, respect, and authority—the foundations of his identity and self-worth—making the loss of control in Germany particularly profound.

Upon displacement, Sameer was no longer in control of leading his family's future, and his sense of self-worth gradually eroded as the power that had guided his success was no longer applicable. Retreating from responsibilities he could no longer navigate, he left a gap in the household that became both a necessity and an opportunity for his wife to step in. She assumed responsibility for the children's education, household management, and interactions with external institutions—roles that Sameer had once led. Over time, her growing competence and confidence placed her in a de facto leadership position within the family.

"I lost everything here, I feel very helpless. My wife barely speaks to me now. I try to avoid her. She talks to the officials; she decides things without asking me. I can't change anything."

This practical adaptation to survive in exile gradually reshaped household power, highlighting how displacement can undermine fathers' authority while compelling other family members to take on roles previously reserved for them. Like many other fathers I spoke with, Sameer found himself living a life that neither resembled the one he had built nor the one he had planned or desired, while his wife became the family's anchor, carrying responsibilities he could no longer manage.

"I AM NOTHING NOW"

I kept visiting Sameer for over a year, during which he refused to meet anywhere outside his apartment. Several times I suggested having coffee together outside, but he did not leave his place for more than a year.

"I used to be a very social person. I loved people. I had many friends who visited me almost every day, often without even making an appointment. When I went shopping, everyone in the neighbourhood greeted me as I walked along the street. Sometimes I went shopping not because we needed anything, but simply to see people outside and have small conversations with them. Now, if I go out, I feel

stressed if anyone speaks to me, and I would not know how to respond. I feel afraid to go out."

The familiarity he once enjoyed in his hometown was completely gone. Streets that had been alive with greetings and small conversations now felt foreign, and even simple tasks, like shopping, became a source of anxiety. What had once been effortless social interaction—an extension of his confidence and place in the community—now required careful thought, leaving him uncertain and exposed at every turn. His sense of agency had eroded; the ease with which he had once moved through the world, understood social cues, and engaged with others had vanished. In this new environment, every encounter reminded him of the distance between the life he had known and the one he was now forced to navigate.

"The children are so well integrated here. They do what they want without coming back to me. They talk and laugh for hours—and I sit there, smiling at their faces like a fool. I no longer understand what is happening in my own home, with my own children; I feel like a foreigner with my own family."

Sameer's reflections highlight the emotional dimension of this household shift. While his children have adapted quickly, integrating socially and gaining independence, he experiences a profound sense of disconnection and alienation within his own home. The laughter and confidence of his children, once a source of pride, now underscore his feelings of estrangement and helplessness, as he struggles to reconcile their autonomy with his diminished role as a father.

"I never imagined living such a life. Now my children accompany me to a doctor's appointment and everywhere because I can't fully express myself. Now they are responsible for me instead of me being responsible for them. This is not what I planned for. I used to be a good father—now I am nothing. Not only me, all men here are worth less than a shoe. This is a reality we cannot deny."

Research indicates that displacement can disrupt traditional masculine roles, especially when refugee fathers are unable to fulfill their perceived responsibilities as providers and protectors.⁸ This shift often leads to a crisis of identity, as men navigate new social and economic positions in family and society. At the same time, the refugee experience often necessitates a renegotiation of family roles and values.⁹ In many cases, women assume responsibilities that were once the domain of men, leading to a reversal or blending of gender roles. My empirical material shows that, for many fathers, this results in a profound sense of diminished authority and status within the family, reshaping their relationships and self-perception in exile.

BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY

When Sameer first arrived in Germany, he carried with him a vision of rebuilding his life with success and determination. As a skilled engineer and manager of his own company, he believed that his qualifications and commitment would pave the way toward meaningful work and the restoration of his family's stability. However, the reality he encountered was far different from what he had anticipated.

"I was prepared. I knew life here wouldn't be easy, but I was ready. I was determined to learn the language and to find a job—not necessarily as an engineer, but at least something related to my qualifications. Something that reflected the many years I spent at university to complete my master's degree. I keep getting rejections for all jobs I apply for. The only job I was offered was in a hospital, taking care of elderly people. I accepted it, thinking it is just a passing phase till I get a decent job, but it didn't. It only made me feel worse."

Instead of opportunities aligned with his experience, Sameer was repeatedly steered toward menial jobs—cleaning, dishwashing, basic warehouse work. While he did not dismiss the value of such labour, he described how these offers

stripped him of dignity and erased the years of effort he had invested in building his career.

The difficulty in securing employment that matches their skills and experience reflects a broader reality for many refugees. For highly skilled individuals, displacement often disrupts professional trajectories as well as personal identity and social status.¹⁰ Often, the inability to contribute economically—either to society or to one's family—intensifies feelings of helplessness and isolation.¹¹

"I was rarely in the kitchen before; I had no time for such tasks at home. I was fully occupied with my own business. Now, I am cooking for old people at the hospital. Sometimes I try to convince myself that this is not bad, but it is all wrong, all what is happening around me is wrong. I just can't accept this life."

Each day, his self-worth eroded further, worn down by integration measures—language courses, job-placement programs, and bureaucratic requirements—that, while designed to support refugees, served as constant reminders of his diminished authority at home.

Under Germany's official integration framework, refugees are required to participate in language courses and accept jobs assigned by the job centre. For Sameer, these measures became a source of stress and frustration: struggling with the language courses meant he had to accept work far below his qualifications; otherwise, his social support benefits would be reduced. The structure of the courses intensified the problem. All refugees, regardless of age, education, or professional background, are placed in the same class. This meant that highly skilled individuals like Sameer often found themselves in classes alongside people who had never attended school or were decades younger. The resulting gaps in learning pace and comprehension left him feeling embarrassed, inadequate, and undervalued. For Sameer, this mismatch not only made language acquisition particularly difficult but also deepened his sense of professional and personal failure. The imbalance also created a painful reversal of roles. Sameer, who

once guided his family, now depended on his children to translate at doctors' offices, schools, and official institutions.

"I lost everything that made me who I was. I used to solve my family's problems, now I become their problem."

These experiences reveal more than professional frustration—they mark a profound transformation of identity. Sameer's sense of masculinity, rooted in his roles as provider, protector, and decision-maker, was deeply shaken by displacement. His room became an escape, both physically and emotionally, shielding him from constant reminders of loss, also symbolizing the growing distance between him and the family. For many refugee fathers, the gap between expectations and reality profoundly affected their roles as fathers and providers, contributing to a deep sense of loss and disconnection. Confronted with employment that ignored their skills, many highly skilled refugees felt uncertain, paralyzed, and increasingly marginalized.

CONCLUSION

The story of Sameer reflects the experience of many Syrian refugee men navigating life in Germany. These struggles often remain unspoken, as fathers avoid revealing their pain, unwilling to expose their growing weakness. Across the families I studied during my PhD, displacement and integration pressures often destabilized traditional family dynamics. Women sometimes assumed roles previously held by men, gaining greater autonomy, while children, in their efforts to belong to the new culture, challenged or bypassed parental authority. These shifts, perceived differently across households depending on prior dynamics, educational levels, and financial situations, frequently led to a weakening of fathers' roles and a profound disruption of family cohesion.

Many continue in roles that fail to reflect their skills, qualifications, or true abilities, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity as breadwinners, while others withdraw silently into

depression and isolation. This withdrawal increases profound transformation within the family: fathers lose authority, children and spouses take on responsibilities traditionally held by them, and the household balance—and the fathers' sense of self—erodes. These experiences highlight the hidden emotional and social costs of displacement that quantitative measurements of integration—such as employment rates or language acquisition fail to capture. While policy frameworks emphasize measurable outcomes, they frequently overlook the psychological and relational dimensions that shape refugees' lived realities. The story of Sameer highlights the struggles of Syrian fathers in exile, emphasizing that displacement affects not only material conditions but also deeply personal and gendered aspects of identity.

Addressing the emotional, relational, and professional marginalization of refugee fathers is essential for comprehensive integration policies that support both individual well-being and family cohesion. Supporting displaced fathers in reclaiming meaningful roles—professionally, socially, and within the family—is critical to fostering both personal dignity and resilient family structures in exile. Public institutions can contribute by recognizing refugees' prior qualifications, providing tailored job-placement programs, offering targeted language and vocational training, and creating opportunities for fathers to engage with their families—such as parenting workshops, family counselling sessions, or community centres that facilitate shared activities. Such measures help men like Sameer rebuild their professional identity, restore their confidence, and participate fully in family and society. Without such support, the deep struggles of men like Sameer continue to affect the stability and daily lives of refugee families in profound and lasting ways.

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