Gender, Identity and Belonging:

How Syrian refugee women negotiate their everyday life in the city of Milan

My husband was bringing us everything we need, we didn’t buy anything, everything was brought to us at home. We didn’t have to worry about anything. That’s why I’m telling you that after we left Syria we are living in a whirlpool; I feel like I’m living in a whirlpool and can’t get out of it.

I don’t have a problem going out if we are (herself and her children) with my husband … maybe I get scared. I don’t know, maybe it is cultural inheritance from our mothers. Maybe that’s it. I feel uncomfortable; not scared, but uncomfortable. That’s why I don’t like to go around alone after sunset and when it gets dark.

Even in the metro, people stare a lot; a lot. They look at me from head to toe and at my hijab, but I don’t say anything. I just get used to it … I like to use the metro because it is a fast mode of transport, but I feel that everyone stares at me.

Wherever you go, you belong to your childhood environment ... Here (in Milan), I’m scared of the future, there is no future. It’s unknown, you don’t have a home or anything while in your country, you have a home, a life, and a family.

The research explores the settlement experiences of eight Syrian refugee women through the lens of everyday practices, to identify whether they could develop a sense of belonging towards unfamiliar settings.

What is belonging?

Belonging is about feeling at home and safe in a place. It is also related to structural expressions of inclusion and exclusion that locate people belonging or non-belonging to a specific collectivity.  

The everyday dimension of belonging

belonging is conceptualized by de Certeau (1984) as a sentiment which is rooted in the everyday life as it grows with time by daily practices.

Discussion

- The participants are facing significant challenges in developing their sense of belonging to their new environment.
- Developing a sense of belonging to the host country and to feel at home involve questions about stability and being able to plan a future.
- The feelings of insecurity and exclusion that cuts across the daily practices of the participants interrupt the process of establishing a sense of belonging to the host country.

Mental maps

The cognitive mapping exercise helped to retrace the differences in the participants’ spatial practices and activities post-displacement, which has a clear gendered dimension, as well as the spaces of belonging/non-belonging in which they perform their everyday life.

Final remarks

- The participants’ sense of belonging, even two to five years into their asylum experience, have not adequately developed towards their host community.
- There are clear potential pathways that may form a foundation onto which this sense can be developed.