

Gender, Identity and Belonging:

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



Amal
47
Mother of 3
Housewife

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.

It [the apartment] is not mine. I feel threatened there, I don't feel stability in this apartment, I'm afraid in this place, especially when they told us that we have to move out ... This is my struggle. I'm searching for stability and I can't find it. Even here, we moved three times up until now and the fourth is coming.



Kinda
31
Mother of 2
Housewife



Farah
30
Single
Employed

People enter the bar and say, "you are Syrian, why are you here? go back to your country". In the beginning, I didn't reply but after some time I felt that I wasn't different from anyone here. They live here, and I live here, they pay taxes and so do I. I didn't take any money from the government; I came here with my own money. I have my own apartment and I pay the rent every month. I am following the law since the first day, so no one has the right to tell me to go back to my country.



Lamia
35
Mother of 2
Freelancer

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.



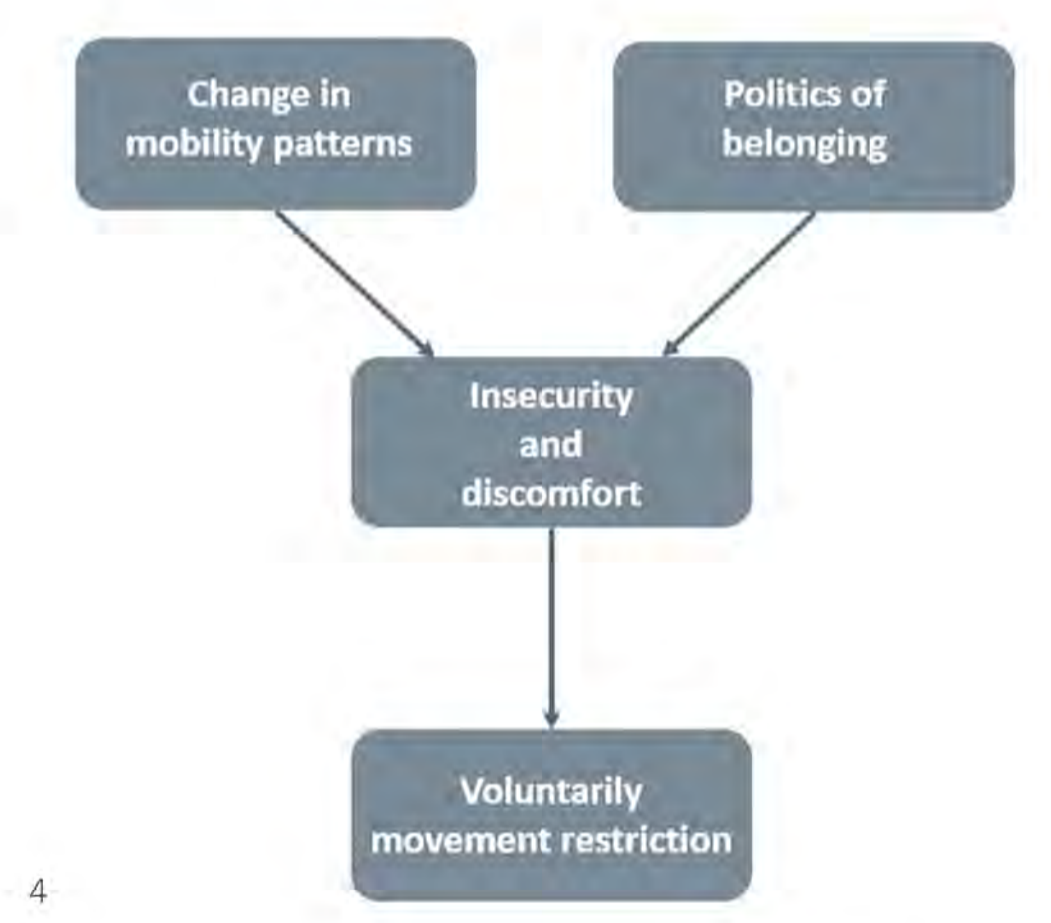
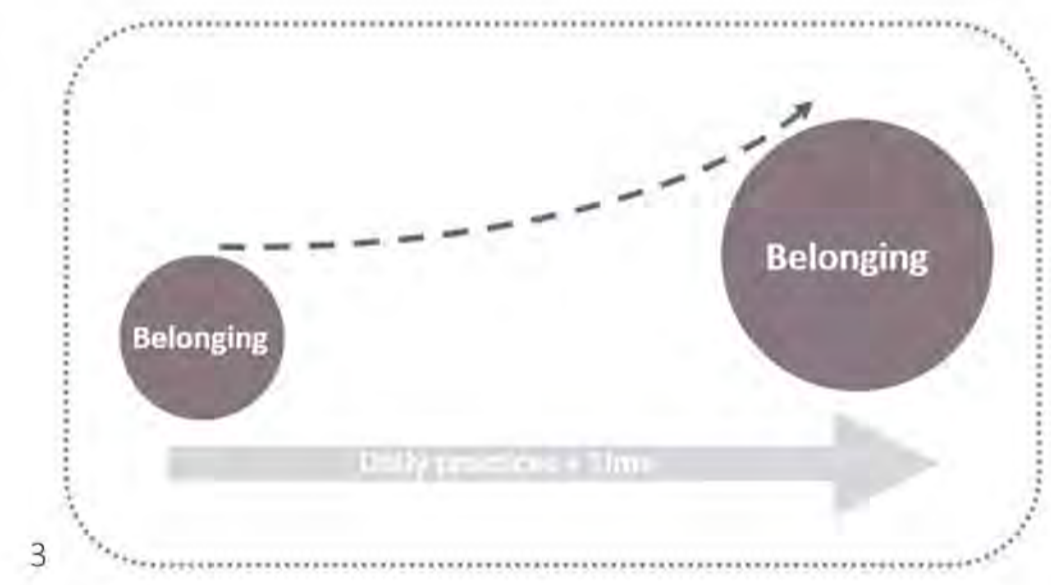
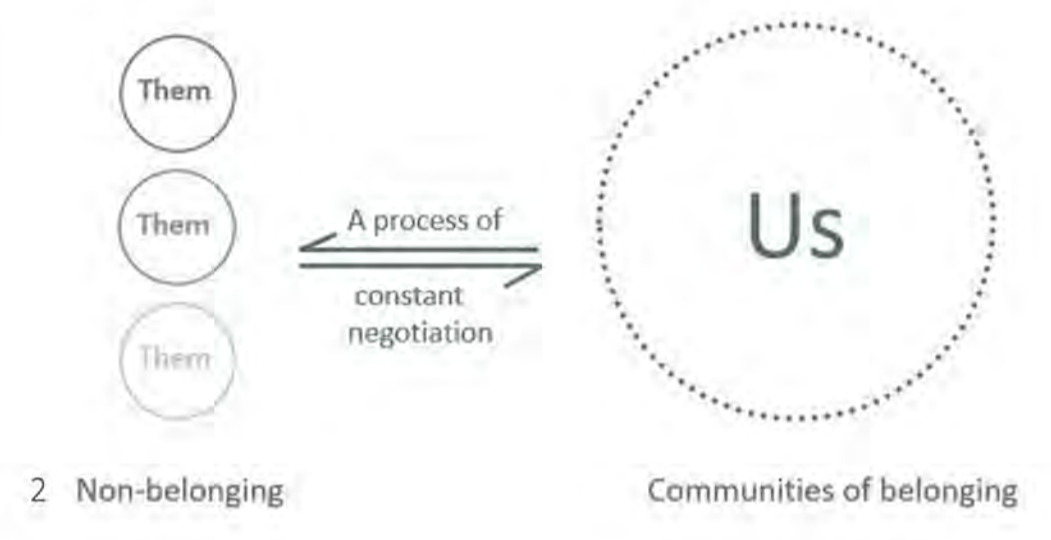
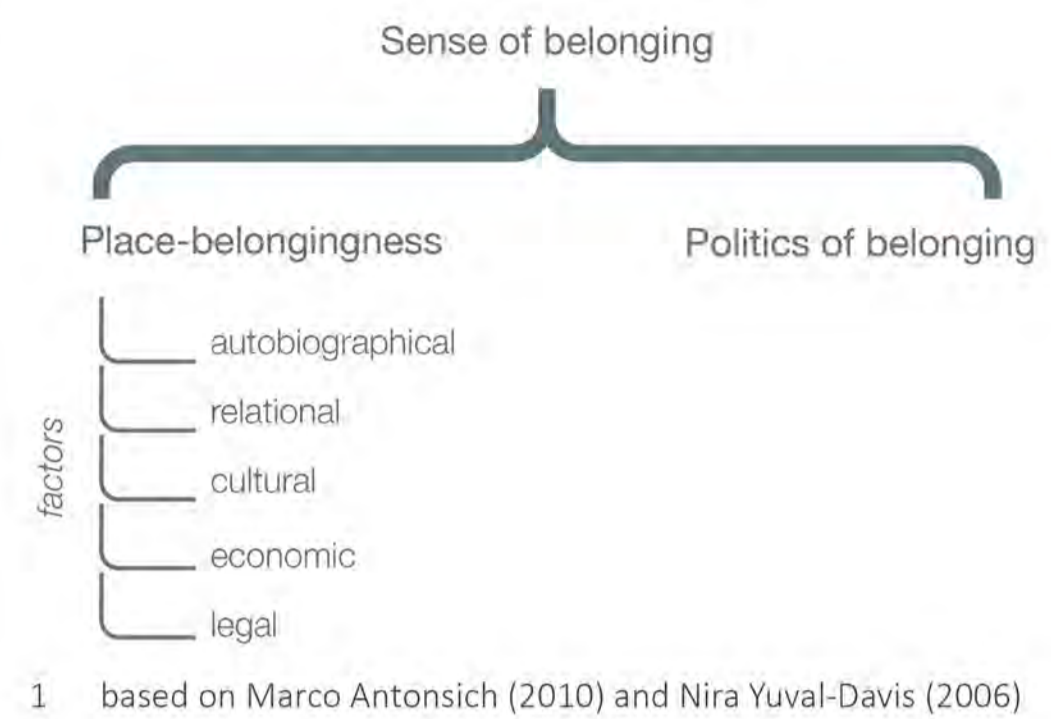
Rawan
22
Married
Student

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 got 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.



Salwa
39
Mother of 1
Freelancer

Wherever you go, you belong to your childhood environment... Here [in Milan], I'm scared of the future, there is no future, it is 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. ① ②

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. ③

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. ④

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. ⑤

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.