Working Lives

Syrian Refugee Women's Intimate Labour and Mobilities in Tunisia

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Nahla: 'On Friday, people help us'.

Um Khalil: 'In the past, our house was always open to guests, whoever was there was invited to eat and drink'.

During the Syrian refugee crisis, humanitarians have focused on putting women to work. In the absence of more structural solutions to ending many Syrians' economic precarity, refugee women are praised as a shadow workforce and budding entrepreneurs that could be enabled through vocational training (e.g. Turner 2019). 'Work', in this sense, means paid work, and ideally creating one's own business. The reality of female refugees' work, however, is more complicated, and employment is not automatically a pathway to 'female empowerment'. In truth, displaced women can take on multiple roles and experience new forms of agency and of oppression, including in the workplace (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2014). Access to work is also complicated by refugees' lack of labour rights in many host countries. By way of illustration, Tunisia is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and both its 2014 and 2022 Constitutions recognise the right to political asylum. However, this has not yet led to domestic asylum legislation (Ben Achour 2019), and there is no clear legal pathway for refugees, or for migrants more generally, to access the Tunisian labour market or citizenship. On major roundabouts in coastal cities, begging women, often accompanied by their children, embody Syrian displacement in this North African country. In November 2021, we met Nahla, a Syrian beggar, on the outskirts of Sfax. At around four in the afternoon, she was squatting on the pavement of a dusty arterial road, clutching a faded photocopy of her Syrian passport. She was surrounded by her young children, including an eight-year-old boy standing guard over his mother. We started to chat and later visited Nahla at her home. Mobile labour at various scales has always played a major role in Nahla's life: she used to work as a peddler in her hometown Hama before the 2011 Syrian revolution, and after displacement as an agricultural worker in Lebanon. An odyssey through Mauritania, Mali, and Algeria later brought her to Tunisia. In Sfax, her mobility inside the city has now turned her into her family's main breadwinner, although she politely refuses to call begging 'work'.

Displaced Syrian women tell themselves and others complex stories about when what they do is considered 'work', especially when they make a living through commodifying aspects of motherhood. The protagonists of this chapter are Nahla, a Syrian beggar, and Um Khalil, a Syrian grandmother-turned-entrepreneur. While Um Khalil resides in an affluent neighbourhood in Tunis, Nahla dwells in abject poverty in Sfax. We conducted interviews with these women as part of a three-month study of Syrian refugees' complex flight trajectories to Tunisia, for which we interviewed 21 Syrian households in various locations in Tunisia in autumn and winter 2021. With around 2,700 people, Syrians make up one quarter of Tunisia's registered refugee population (UNHCR 2022). Before the Syrian conflict, Syrians could enter Tunisia without a visa. In February 2012, Tunisia expelled the Syrian ambassador and cut all diplomatic ties, in solidarity with the Syrian revolution (Boubakri 2015). In 2012, former Tunisian President Marzouki announced that all Syrian refugees would receive humanitarian protection, but the promise never materialised. Today, most Syrians in Tunisia are registered as 'asylum-seekers' with the UNHCR, with their application for refugee protection pending (cf. Garelli/Tazzoli 2017). As the UNCHR does not publish gender- or age-disaggregated (or other more detailed) data on Syrian refugees in Tunisia, it is hard to know whether working women are the norm or the exception for this small community. However, available qualitative insights indicate that many Syrian women in Tunisia live in multigenerational households and have caring duties for young children and the elderly, which might make it harder for them to take on paid jobs (UNHCR 2014). Their profile is thus different from that of other migrant women in Tunisia, notably Sub-Saharan African women who tend to leave their children with family members in their home countries, thus enjoying greater freedom when it comes to finding work abroad (Ben Hadj Hassen 2024). Evidence from other refugee-hosting middle-income countries in the region also suggests that Syrian women's labour market participation rate is very low (e.g. below ten percent in Jordan; cf. UN Women 2017). What we do know, however, is that the Syrian refugee community in Tunisia is not homogeneous (Zuntz et al. 2022). In our wider research, we found that Tunisia is home to two Syrian populations with different socioeconomic standings, travel routes, and legal status in the host country: Syrians with and without pre-war ties to Tunisia. The protagonists in this chapter were selected to illustrate experiences from both groups. They entered Tunisia through different routes and now have different livelihood strategies. Before 2011, some middle-class Syrians like Um Khalil established connections to Tunisia through the transnational trade and educational migration of their spouses and were later able to mobilise these networks to get to safety and rebuild their lives in exile. Nahla, by contrast, comes from a working-class background and had no initial ties to Tunisia. She only arrived in the country after a long and fragmented journey through multiple Middle Eastern and North African countries. Nahla is still waiting for her asylum claim to be processed, while Um Khalil bypassed the asylum system, quickly securing Tunisian residency, and later even citizenship, through alternative legal routes.

What does it mean to be 'Syrian' to these women from different class backgrounds and with different forms of legal status in their host country? We chose to contrast these women's experiences not to reify their 'Syrianness', but rather to explore the different ways in which they have turned the combination of Syrian identity and motherhood into an asset. Together, they exemplify the public faces of gendered 'Syrianness' in Tunisia:

as a begging mother on a roundabout, representing suffering and refugeeness, and as the talented housewife and chef, the personification of traditional Middle Eastern hospitality. Looking at their activities as 'intimate labour' helps us highlight commonalities between their disparate experiences of life in displacement. By 'intimate labour', we understand 'work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction' (Boris/Parreñas 2010: 7). This type of labour includes managing relationships and is associated with the home, body, and family. What Um Khalil and Nahla have in common is that both contribute paid and unpaid services to their families, including cooking, childcare, but also sang-froid when finding their way through war zones and unknown urban territory in Tunisia. Even though humanitarians like to imagine displaced women as future individualistic entrepreneurs, the reality of their and many other women's work is that it benefits their entire family, fits around their caring duties as mothers and wives, and complements, rather than replaces, male family members' jobs (cf. Rabo 2008). The Syrian protagonists of this chapter are either mothers or grandmothers, tending to their husbands' and (grand)children's immediate and more long-term material and emotional needs. In both cases, the husbands cannot fulfil their role as breadwinners anymore, but continue to impact what kind of work women can do and whether they get recognition for it.

'Syrianness' and, in particular, ideas of 'Syrian motherhood', come into play because maternal ideals and practices inform both women's travails but have also been commoditised: as home-made Syrian cuisine that appeals to wealthy party planners or as the stylised image of the suffering refugee-mother that can elicit the sympathy of passers-by. We do not aim to paint our subjects as 'natural mothers'. Rather, we ask how refugee women perform motherhood to different audiences and what opportunities these performances afford them. We show that women's labour may be taken for granted and devalued, as doing chores is understood as a part of a mother and wife's 'natural' role. But it can also be assigned new monetary value when it supports the household income of dispersed families. As Zelizer (2005) famously argued, monetising one's intimate relations is far from straightforward; it does not simply empty them of affect or make them less authentic. In practice, people constantly mix up economics and intimacy, and our protagonists' talk about labour brings together economic rationality, family values, emotions, and memories. We look at the 'complicated stories and practices [that Syrian refugees develop] for different situations that mingle economic transactions and intimacy' (Zelizer 2005: 12); for example, when Nahla declares her begging 'not work' or Um Khalil frames her catering service as 'family work'.

Through exploring the link between refugee women's gendered labour and mobilities, this chapter expands existing debates on what counts as 'intimate labour'. Previously, feminist scholars have studied intimate labour in the context of transnational migrations, e.g. for sex workers, care workers, and surrogate mothers, problematising distinctions between the 'local' and the 'global'. Existing research connects the dots between multinational corporations and transnational flows of Big Data and Big Money, and the everyday acts through which people sustain their livelihoods, and which place them in local and global economies (Mountz/Hyndman 2006; Pratt/Rosner 2012). A constant theme in all these cases is workers' mobility, including border-crossings and aspirations of social mobility for oneself and one's loved ones. Refugees, of course, experience different

forms of movement, as well as stuckness, but they seldom have the time to plan ahead. Syrian refugee women in Tunisia make for a fascinating case study because policymakers and the media tend to think of Tunisia solely as one step of South-North migrations to Europe. In truth, however, Tunisia has long been involved in circular South-South migrations, and in recent years, restrictive European bordering practices have also turned Tunisia into a forced destination for refugees and migrants (Garelli/Tazzioli 2017). This is not to say that all refugees experience movement in the same way. Often, the worst affected victims of conflict are not those forced to leave, but those who lack the resources to escape and thus have to stay put (Lubkemann 2008). As this chapter shows, displacement can combine experiences of forced mobility and forced immobility; for example, we look at Um Khalil's decision to work from home, but also resume international travel, and Nahla's sense of stuckness in the streets of Sfax, but also inside Tunisia's asylum bureaucracy. Studying Nahla and Um Khalil's commodification of Syrian motherhood in concert with their decision-making power over their movements helps us appreciate the agency, or lack thereof, that shapes what forms of intimate labour women engage in. The chapter looks at the factors that curtail our protagonists' social and spatial mobility, and also at how our subjects carve out new forms of mobility for themselves in times of displacement. It shows that refugee women's mobilities are shaped by class, family dynamics, pre-war experiences of travel, legal status in Tunisia, as well as by women's own expectations of what counts as a good life. In doing so, we challenge simplistic assumptions about a direct link between female mobility and professional careers. Contrary to humanitarian assumptions, some women may experience mobility as precarious and, conversely, staying at home as more conducive towards economic activities that can be combined with family life.

Methodology

We met Um Khalil in Tunis through a Tunisian refugee support organisation. Our contact with Nahla came about through a chance encounter at a bus stop in Sfax. Women's consent to participate in the research was obtained verbally and repeatedly, first on the phone and then in person. Both women were interviewed inside their own homes, in the presence of various family members. As we discuss in the remaining sections, observing which family members tell women's stories, and who has to remain silent, gave us information about our interviewees' status in family hierarchies. At the same time, it made following the conversations more complicated. In Um Khalil's case, she and her husband did not agree on the exact chronology of their travels to Tunisia; in Nahla's home, the narration was taken over by her older sister-in-law. As ethnographers, it is not our job to resolve these contradictions, but rather to acknowledge that narratives of displacement are complicated, especially when they involve multiple people. Ethnographic research involves a delicate balancing of interviewees' self-representation, half-truths, and stories full of holes (cf. Saleh 2017). For the Syrians we interviewed, seeking refuge was always a family project, and this is reflected in the sometimes-discordant mixture of voices in this chapter. In our research, this was as true of wealthy Um Khalil, who was unwilling

to provide details of her business deals, as of poor Nahla, whose mendicity is discussed by her family only in euphemistic terms.

All interviews were conducted in Arabic by the two female team members. One of the interviewers was a native speaker of Tunisian Arabic, the other fluent in Syrian Arabic. Remarkably, the interviewees' choice of dialect oscillated between Tunisian and Syrian Arabic; this 'migrantisation' of their language hints at their more or less stable position in Tunisian society. Ironically, Um Khalil, who secured residency in the host country, spoke eloquent Syrian Arabic. Nahla used a working-class version of the same dialect, with some Tunisian words. Our Syrian interviewees' diglossia highlights the importance of taking migrant and refugee women at their word, quite literally, to understand the complexity of their lives. It indicates that the social experimentation that characterises their intimate labour rewires not only their kinship relations, but even their vocabulary.

Nahla: Work or Charity?

On the day of the interview, it rained heavily in Sfax. Our taxi struggled to make its way through the flooded streets of the suburb where Nahla, who looked like she was in her early thirties, lived with her family. In the street, her oldest son greeted us. Despite the biting November cold, the boy wore sandals without socks. Inside the apartment, Nahla, her much older husband, his sister, and seven children of kindergarten and primary school age, were huddled up around the flame of a gas cooker in an empty, damp room.

Nahla and her family come from Hama, a city on the banks of the Orontes river in western Syria. Before the Syrian conflict, her husband worked as a blacksmith, and Nahla bought make-up in the city centre of Hama and then resold it in rural areas. Her sister-in-law recalled how Nahla would knock on doors and sell mascara to Syrian housewives. Nahla's family also used to migrate to Lebanon to work in agriculture; her never-ending hustle is typical of the precarious situation of many circular Syrian migrants before the war (Chalcraft 2008). Unlike Um Khalil, Nahla thus brought to Tunisia pre-war work experience outside the home, after a lifetime of menial mobile labour. In 2011, her family fled Hama and spent three years in an informal settlement in northern Lebanon. During this time, Nahla and her husband returned to working informally in the harvest. In 2014, the family boarded a plane to Mauritania; they transited through Tunis airport, even though they only decided to move to Tunisia three years later. In Nouakchott, Mauritania, Nahla's family joined other Syrian families in crossing the desert in Mali and Algeria, along the established West African Migration Route. In Algeria, they lived for three years in Béjaïa, a port city, before arriving in Tunisia in 2017. Nahla's lengthy and fragmented journey to Tunisia is relevant here for several reasons: first, it exemplifies the legal predicament that Syrians experience in Tunisia. Unable to enter Tunisia by plane, many Syrians have been forced to undertake increasingly dangerous routes, during which families like Nahla's incurred multiple costs for plane tickets, bus journeys, and smugglers. Other Syrians in Tunisia who had travelled along the same route told us that they could only finance their trip by repeatedly borrowing money from relatives

and local acquaintances. It is thus highly likely that Nahla's family arrived in Tunisia with substantial debts.

Second, during their flight, the family grew dependent on the international humanitarian system – but aid has not proven a secure source of income. Nahla's family registered with the UNCHR in Lebanon, Algeria, and Tunisia, countries that are either not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Lebanon) or have signed the Convention but not translated it into domestic asylum legislation (Algeria, Tunisia). In Lebanon, Algeria, and Tunisia, the family received financial assistance from the UNHCR, and the aid agency also covered the hospital bills for the delivery of Nahla's younger children in Algeria and Tunisia. But their registration did not protect the family from violence at the hands of locals and even state authorities. In Lebanon, they suffered frequent racist attacks from the host community. In Algeria, the brother and cousin of Nahla's husband were deported to the desert between Niger and Algeria, in contravention of the Convention's principle of non-refoulement. In Tunisia, they had been registered as 'asylum-seekers' since 2017. While financial assistance had stopped several months before our interview, Nahla's other established coping strategies did not work either. As her sister-in-law explained: 'She cannot sell make-up like she used to do in Syria. In Tunisia, people buy in shops'. In urban centres in North Africa, opportunities for petty trading or agricultural work are much rarer than they are in rural areas in the Middle East. Without formal qualifications and childcare, it was unlikely that Nahla could find a job in Tunisia's professional retail sector. Nor did Nahla have any domestic skills or social capital that she could turn into an income-generating activity in Tunisia. In Sfax, the family lived an isolated life and did not socialise with Syrians or Tunisians, except for close relatives like Nahla's sister-in-law. The situation was made worse by the fact that livelihood opportunities for refugees and migrants, through the Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability (TAMSS), rarely take into account women's particular needs: most jobs are offered to men, as they are considered the head of the family, even though Nahla's case shows that women may also become breadwinners. The employment on offer consists of blue-collar jobs that often require candidates to move to other regions, such as Djerba or Zarzis, thus tearing families apart. What is missing is vocational training, for example as pastry chefs or in the textile industry that could be acceptable to females. Lack of humanitarian assistance, together with Nahla's insecure legal status and the absence of other job opportunities, thus compelled her to beg. After our interview, her situation was exacerbated even more when the local office of the Tunisian Refugee Council in Sfax was closed for several months in 2022: the very infrastructure of the Tunisian asylum response became not only inaccessible, but also physically absent from her life (Personal communication, Marwen Bouneb, January 2023).

The micro-economy of begging is a sensitive issue. As Nahla's sister-in-law exclaimed, 'her situation is very difficult'! In Sfax, Nahla earned between 25 and 40 Dinar (around 8–12 Euro) per day, i.e. around 125–200 Dinar (around 40–60 Euro) per week. By comparison, Tunisian minimum wage for a 40-hour week is around 390 Dinar (around 121 Euro) per month (Votre Salaire 2022). At first, Nahla's monthly income may thus look relatively high, but she did not go out on rainy days and paid six Dinar per day to take a taxi from her suburb to Sfax's more central roads. And, more importantly, she was the family's sole breadwinner, as her husband was too sick for manual labour; her begging

barely covered the monthly rent of 260 Dinar (around 81 Euro). Most days, Nahla stayed outside between 9 am and 4 pm. While she usually brought her youngest child that she was still nursing, on holidays and weekends, she was also accompanied by her oldest son – the boy we saw protecting her in the street. This type of work is in the public sphere, but it is also incredibly intimate: Nahla put her body on the frontline, exposing herself and her young children to heat and cold, dirt, and the glances and potential aggressions of passers-by. We would have liked to hear from Nahla whether she felt uncomfortable on her own in an unfamiliar city, but her husband replied for her: 'There are people in the street, she is safe'.

It is noteworthy that when we politely questioned Nahla about her 'work', she and her family preferred the euphemism 'people help us'. For example, we asked Nahla whether she had approached local mosques for support and she replied: 'On Friday, people help us' (this refers to the common phenomenon of people begging outside mosques after the Friday prayer). Throughout the conversation, it emerged that this was not the first time that the family had relied on charity. Comparing her life as a refugee in Algeria and Tunisia, Nahla explained that the family had had a better life in Algeria 'because people helped us there'. In Sfax, their Tunisian neighbours brought them food during Ramadan. Even though begging took up most of Nahla's time and generates an income, it was thus not recognised as 'work' by either herself or her family. Rather, our interviewees redirected our attention to other people's – their benefactors' – actions. Despite the multiple activities it involved, begging was framed not as an active process, but rather as something that was done to Nahla as the passive receiver of other people's charity. In pre-war Syria, Nahla and her family had been part of the struggling working class, getting by through menial labour, petty trade, and circular migrations to neighbouring countries. In Tunisia, they entered the social hierarchy even lower, at the very bottom, using grifting, begging, and support from strangers and neighbours to cope with entrenched precarity. And there is another reason why Nahla might have avoided the terminology of 'work': as a Syrian lawyer in Tunis, himself a long-term migrant and co-founder of a support organisation for his compatriots, told us, the established and affluent Syrian diaspora in the country did not consider beggars such as Nahla 'real Syrians'. Given the lack of interaction between middle-class and working class Syrians in Tunisia, it is unlikely that Nahla would have been aware of such prejudices. Still, framing mendicity as 'charity' in line with Islamic values might have made her activities more acceptable to the wider public, to neighbours, fellow Syrians, and perhaps herself.

Nahla's experience challenges simplistic assumptions about the link between female mobility and access to better livelihoods. Nahla was far from being a home-bound housewife, but for her, freedom of movement did not translate into better professional opportunities, or, in the eyes of her family, a 'job'. On the contrary, her high degree of mobility at the urban level did nothing to end the family's social isolation, as Nahla's encounters with benevolent passers-by were always short-lived. While begging, she was also exposed to extreme weather and perhaps even violence, while her children missed out on school. Her presence in the streets of Sfax was thus not a remedy for, but rather a symptom of her precarity. At the same time, Nahla's newfound role as the family's main provider has not changed her precarious positioning inside her own family. When listening again to the recording of our interview with Nahla, we noticed a curious thing: although the in-

terview was about her and the begging she did for a living, we rarely heard her speak. Instead, her husband and older sister-in-law, who was visiting from Tunis that day, told her story. The fact that her young children, who frequently demanded her attention, surrounded Nahla also made it difficult for her to take part in the conversation – indeed, her baby's crying frequently interrupted our interview recording. The literal absence of Nahla's voice points to her subordinate position in the family, even though she has now become their only source of income.

Um Khalil: The Family is the Business

Um Khalil, a Syrian housewife-turned-entrepreneur in her mid-sixties, graciously welcomed us into her living room in Menzah, an upscale neighbourhood in Tunis. However, it was difficult to keep her attention for long. Our conversation was punctuated by multiple phone calls from clients and acquaintances, testimony to our host's economic success and standing in the small, but affluent 'old' Syrian Diaspora in Tunis. On her phone, Um Khalil proudly showed us pictures of Syrian dishes on the Facebook page of her catering business: *shanklish* [Syrian cheese], *mansaf* [a Syrian-Jordanian lamb dish], *labneh* [Syrian yoghurt], *kabsa* [a Syrian rice dish]. As we were getting ready to leave, Um Khalil insisted we stay for dinner. One of her daughters-in-law started to cover the family's spacious dining table with traditional Syrian food. Soon, there were several types of salad, yoghurt, hummus, and meat. Three generations of Um Khalil's family, including our host and her husband, various sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren, gathered around the table. This Syrian dinner, prepared under the watchful eye of Um Khalil herself, signalled to us the family's identity, values, and sense of belonging, and Um Khalil's role as the group's matriarch. In Tunis, this type of food had also become key to the family's economic success.

Before the war, Um Khalil used to be a housewife in Damascus, taking care of her husband and six children. To her, hospitality and food were a way of life: 'In the past, our house was always open to guests, whoever was there was invited to eat and drink. The more people ate [at our home], the happier we were'. To Um Khalil, home-made food was associated with tradition and her role as a mother. In the city centre of Damascus, her family inhabited an old building. 'I have always preferred historical places, not "Dubai-style" living. That's why I always cook, in the same spirit [of traditions]'. However, her sense of rootedness used to go hand in hand with an intermittently mobile life. Before the war, her husband worked as a trader and together, they visited Tunisia regularly. Later, they capitalised on their pre-war knowledge of travel routes and social networks to seek refuge in Tunis: in 2013, the family boarded a bus and travelled through Jordan, Egypt, and Libya, to reach Tunisia. Um Khalil's familiarity with Tunisia and travelling was central to how she makes sense of her displacement and multiple losses. She was adamant that she had come to Tunisia not as a 'refugee', but as a 'tourist', and in Tunis, she never registered with the UNHCR. Still, she occasionally used her Syrian citizenship to claim 'refugeeness' and access funding; a small start-up grant from Terre d'Asile, a non-profit organisation that supports refugees and migrants, allowed her to open her catering business. Um Khalil managed to pay back the grant after only a couple of months. With a core

team of only six people, all of them family members, she has since provided catering for the Jordanian ambassador in Tunis, the Institut Français (i.e. the French cultural institute), weddings and funerals all over the country, as well as Syrian restaurants in Tunis, Hammamet, and Zarzis. At a wedding party with several hundreds of guests, her family makes a net gain of 2,000 Dinar (around 620 Euro); Um Khalil works multiple such events per month. That makes her business a part of the vibrant Syrian hospitality scene that has blossomed in Tunisia in recent years, encompassing restaurants, fast food eateries, bakeries, and catering services. One of her sisters also owns a restaurant in Tunis, a son works as a chef in an upscale Syrian restaurant close to the family home, and another son is a member of a traditional Syrian dance group, run by a young Tunisian-Syrian man, that was even featured in a talent show on Tunisian television. For Um Khalil, there was a direct link between her economic success, legal security, and cross-border mobility. Through her business, she quickly obtained residency permits and later Tunisian passports for her entire family. This is highly surprising, as Tunisian citizenship remains unavailable even for spouses of Tunisian citizens. While Um Khalil was deliberately vague about the circumstances of her naturalisation, she underlined her close ties with foreign ambassadors, other affluent Syrians, and longstanding Tunisian friends. What is clear, however, are the practical advantages of acquiring a Tunisian passport: having Syrian and Tunisian citizenship enabled her to travel more freely than registered asylum-seekers. Some years ago, when her son fell in love on social media with a girl in Syria, she went back to her home country to meet his fiancée, hand over her dowry, and organise the girl's trip to Tunis. Visiting an active war zone was only possible because she used her various passports to travel to Syria as a Syrian and return to Tunisia as a Tunisian.

Um Khalil's work blurs the boundaries between home, family, and business, as well as paid and unpaid labour. On the one hand, cooking is a 'labour of love' and Um Khalil discussed her own role and hardship as a wife and mother in food-related metaphors. Having got married at the age of 16, she compared her life to *makdous* [pickled aubergine]:

> We receive the aubergine when it is still fresh and then we add salt. Life becomes bitter. In a similar vein, women get married young and live through a lot of pain, until their bodies become hard. But still, they love their husbands in their heart and they protect the family.

In this regard, her current life as an entrepreneur is not a break, but rather a continuation of her pre-war existence as a housewife. Holding on to traditions – such as early marriage, traditional family structures, and home-made food – has helped Um Khalil deal with changes in her environment, but also inside her own family. Despite her economic success and comfortable living situation, Um Khalil expressed a strong sense of alienation: 'We integrated into Tunisian society [economically], but I don't feel Tunisian. I told you, this morning I cried'. Much of her loneliness comes from the lack of more mundane, un-commodified hospitality that she associates with Syrian culture: 'Here, we live the European way: no one [from the Tunisian neighbours] ever comes to visit'. Even though Um Khalil's sister and her own children live in Tunis, she misses the daily chats with female neighbours that she was used to in Damascus. New lifestyles have also changed family dynamics. Um Khalil married off her older children when they were still

teenagers. 'This is how I was brought up, and my mother, and my maternal aunt. But my son wants to study and my daughter wants to study and take the plane'. Her children's new ambitions of social and spatial mobility threaten the family as a homogeneous unit, as well as established ways of securing intergenerational transitions. As marriage plans and cohabitation do not seem attractive to the young generation anymore, Um Khalil has had to find alternative ways of holding the family together, including through offering employment to her adult offspring.

This is only possible because, on the other hand, cooking is business. Just like Nahla, Um Khalil sells a particular form of Syrian motherhood associated with home life and devotion to one's family. But while Nahla's begging showcases refugee suffering, Um Khalil has managed to turn into a commodity a form of Syrianness that is more appealing to affluent Tunisian audiences: home-made Syrian cuisine. And to be clear, Um Khalil understands cooking as hard work, both for herself and for others. While the *makdous*, for example, serves as a metaphor of her family and gendered identities, it is also a material object that requires manual labour. As Um Khalil explained, 'by the way, this [*makdous*] is hard work'! While her food is home-made, it is also produced in large quantities. To cater to huge crowds, Um Khalil's team prepares huge amounts of deep-frozen food in advance. For example, several fridges in their apartment always contain 2,000 pieces of *kibbeh* [Syrian meatballs]. As the head of the company, Um Khalil never takes days off. 'There is no retirement, people from the Middle East say, when we retire, we die'. While she does not pay a permanent salary to her sons and daughters-in-law, she pays each of them 250 Tunisian Dinar for a two-day wedding (around 78 Euro), turning loved ones into employees. From an economic point of view, Um Khalil cannot afford to stop working because her business covers all the household expenses of their multigenerational family. Still, as her home is also her workplace, commercial cooking blends in with other unpaid caring tasks. Every Friday, for example, one of her daughters brings over her three young children, whom Um Khalil watches over the weekend, and while cooking.

Just like Nahla's example, Um Khalil's 'labour of love' complicates how we might think about work opportunities for refugee women. Um Khalil deliberately decided against opening yet another Syrian restaurant in Tunis; instead, she prefers running a catering business from her own kitchen. Her decision was partly economically motivated, as working from home allowed her to save rent. But it also allows her to be surrounded by her beloved children and grandchildren and be there for her ailing husband. For herself and her daughters-in-law, staying at home does not hinder their professional projects, but rather provides the stage for a successful business in line with family values. In return, this highlights the complex relationship between social and spatial mobility. Just like Nahla's case, it shows that women's income-generating activities outside the home are not a simple recipe for addressing precarious refugee livelihoods. Being on the street makes Nahla more vulnerable, while Um Khalil has found a job – or rather created a job for herself – that allows family members from two generations to work together from home and even includes free childcare. Yet, we should take Um Khalil's praise of her home-bound existence with a grain of salt. However much Um Khalil likes to emphasise her secluded life, as the matriarch, she leaves the house, and Tunis, much more frequently than her daughters-in-law. Her superior standing in the multigenerational household, not her gender alone, determines her greater freedom of movement.

In recent years, Um Khalil has teamed up with an event agency in Zarzis, in southern Tunisia, to find clients all over the country. One summer, she spent the entire season without her family, working in a pastry shop in Zarzis. Once, she taught a cooking course at a fancy hotel in Sousse to a women-only class. While the younger women of the family rarely leave the house, Um Khalil works with other mobile women. In Tunis, for example, she relies on the services of a female taxi driver who delivers her food. With a smile, Um Khalil explained, 'I don't work with men, they always try to interfere'.

Conclusion: Ambivalent Femininities, Ambivalent Mobilities

In this chapter, we discussed the relationship between different types of 'intimate labour' and mobility for Syrian refugee women in Tunisia. During displacement, commoditising motherhood can turn into a livelihood strategy for women on the margins of the formal labour market. The intimacy of our protagonists' activities comes from the embodied nature of their work, the extension of domestic practices such as cooking and nursing one's child into the public sphere, and the rewiring of kinship relationships: while Nahla's children are part of the stage-managing of her suffering, Um Khalil has united her grown-up children around her as employees. However, their stories are hardly straightforward examples of female 'emancipation'. Rather, they illuminate the complexities of the social production of femininities in refugee contexts. Acts of cooking and feeding may cement stereotypical views of women as home-makers; a mother's ability to nourish her family may be regarded by herself and others as a way of 'succeeding' at motherhood (cf. Cairns/Johnston 2015). At the same time, the commoditised version of motherhood is more than the on-going legacy of patriarchal oppression in refugee women's lives. Um Khalil, with her cooking classes all over Tunisia, behaves not unlike other celebrity chefs. In truth, in a neoliberal context, in which commoditised motherhood can enable female entrepreneurship and generate money, such performances simultaneously reaffirm, but also challenge gendered inequalities.

As refugee women's performances of Syrian motherhood are ambivalent, so are their experiences of mobility. Our ethnographic findings highlight that the ability to *choose* movement, rather than movement itself, continues to shape refugee women's lives after the initial displacement, long after they have settled in host countries. In this regard, our research adds to debates on 'intimate labour' and mobility: for refugees, unlike migrants, movement is rarely (at least initially) a project to improve their lives. However, there is not one homogenous way in which mobility is experienced. Multiple factors shape whether displacement makes women more or less mobile and what types of paid and unpaid labour they engage in. Class, women's positioning in multigenerational households and shifting family dynamics, pre-war connections to Tunisia, and legal (in)security together affect whether refugee women experience mobility as empowering or as precarious. Women like Um Khalil, who are the head of their families, with middle-class social capital and business acumen, can choose whether to lead mobile or sedentary lives. Um Khalil, for example, enjoys working from the comfort of her own home, but also travelling all over Tunisia as a businesswoman, while Nahla has no say over her movements: she takes to the streets because begging is her only source of income. Conversely, agency

over one's movements also shapes one's ability to make a home: Um Khalil, securely established as an entrepreneur in Tunis and surrounded by her children, has no interest in moving to Europe. To her, Tunisia has become a country of permanent settlement. Nahla, by contrast, dreams of resettlement in Europe, as her family see no future in Tunisia. Different forms of intimate labour, it seems, are thus inversely linked together: Um Khalil's catering business has allowed her to establish a lasting home. Nahla's begging, however, may keep the family alive, but only entrenches her feelings of alienation and poverty, thwarting attempts at home-making.

On a final note, policymakers tend to look at refugees as disconnected from host country economies – but Um Khalil's experience hints at a broader story about the migrantisation of female domestic labour. Among scholars of displacement, there is a growing interest in the political economy of displacement and refugees' positioning in global capitalism. There is now a greater awareness that the exploitative labour that many refugees' experience is not simply the by-product of bad humanitarian governance or refugees' lack of economic integration in host countries, but rather illustrates broader dynamics that affect people across the Global South: movement control, euphemised as 'migration governance', and labour exploitation go hand in hand. Around the world, the displaced join a reserve army of other structurally marginalised workers, including migrants, women, and youth (Bhagat 2020; Rajaram 2018; Ramsay 2022). While most studies on migrant and refugee labour have been conducted in the Global North, our insights from Tunisia suggest that similar developments are underway in transit countries in the Global South. Labour market participation rates of Tunisian women are considerably higher than the regional average in the Middle East and North Africa (28% vs. 18% in 2021; World Bank 2022a; 2022b), and more and more Tunisian women join the workforce every year. In Tunisia, as all over the world, growing female employment will increase the demand for outsourcing food work to nannies, fast food workers, school ladies etc. – many of whom will be migrant and refugee women such as Um Khalil (cf. Cairns/Johnston 2015). In the figure of the female refugee, producing food from her home, two neoliberal narratives about individual responsibility and 'strong women' intersect: the humanitarian system's current approach to refugee entrepreneurship as a panacea to structural barriers to labour market integration, and postfeminist ideas about female empowerment through work. The latter obscures the fact that women's employment outside the home hinges on the labour of other, more structurally marginalised women. To capture this nexus, we need to understand better the social fabric and gendered dynamics that underpin diverse forms of mobile refugee labour. As our research shows, displacement perpetuates, and sometimes rewires, not only labour relations, but also intimate connections, including family hierarchies, social identities, consumption patterns, and the division of labour within households. Hence the need to redirect our focus on refugee women's mundane experiences of work and family life: such intimate labour is not made up of isolated occurrences, but rather connects women to broader economic and political processes. Syrian women's labour in Tunisia provides insights into the nexus of complex migratory systems, the international humanitarian regime, border policies, and local and globalised industries.