

## Patriarchy in Transit: Family Conflicts of Syrian Migrants in Germany

Akshita Sharma

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Akshita.Sharma@stud.uni-giessen.de

### Abstract:

*Syrian Families in Germany: The Multi-Faceted Reality of Adaptation to a New Surrounding* analyzes intra-familial conflicts of Syrian migrants in Germany. Using an ethnographic approach, Kutaiba Kaidouha explores how migration, cultural changes and challenges, and legal structures create conflicts between spouses and change marital relations. The study highlights normative pluralism, conflict management practices, and the vulnerabilities surrounding religious marriages, significantly contributing to migration studies and intercultural research.

### Patriarchat im Wandel: Familiäre Konflikte syrischer Migrant\_innen in Deutschland

#### German Abstract:

*Syrian Families in Germany: The Multi-Faceted Reality of Adaptation to a New Surrounding* analysiert innerfamiliäre Konflikte syrischer Migrant\_innen in Deutschland. Mit einem ethnografischen Ansatz untersucht Kutaiba Kaidouha, wie Migration, kulturelle Veränderungen und Herausforderungen sowie rechtliche Strukturen Konflikte zwischen Ehepartnern hervorrufen und eheliche Beziehungen verändern. Die Studie beleuchtet normativen Pluralismus, Konfliktmanagementpraktiken und die Schwachstellen religiöser Ehen und leistet damit einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Migrationsforschung und zur interkulturellen Forschung.

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Akshita Sharma

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

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Migration is a global phenomenon and plays a significant role in shaping today's geopolitical world. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes, both within Syria and across its borders, due to the totalitarian and oppressive regime in power. In *Syrian Families in Germany: The Multi-Faceted Reality of Adaptation to a New Surrounding*, Kutaiba Kaidouha illustrates that the migration of Syrian families into German society often causes intra-familial conflicts. Kaidouha examines the factors that fuel such conflicts, the conditions under which they escalate into violence, and the strategies and coping mechanisms families employ to manage these situations.

The main interest of Kaidouha's study is how forced migration affects intimate relationships among family members, particularly relationships between spouses, and how the integration process contributes to the redefinition of gender roles within the household. Kaidouha conceptualizes conflict broadly, including both interpersonal disputes within the family and conflicts between families within the Syrian migrant community. He conducted a total of 32 qualitative interviews (biographical narrative and in-depth) in the city of Nuremberg to gather data on family conflict issues, such as marital disputes, religious disagreements, and infidelity.

The study is divided into three parts. In the first part, Kaidouha outlines his theoretical framework and methodology (Ch. 1), and introduces the research group and the field site. He explains that he chose to conduct the interviews in Nuremberg because he had established close connections with resident Syrian families while living there for two years. His pre-existing relationship with the participants facilitated communication with trust and enabled him to

discuss sensitive topics such as divorce, infidelity, and violence. Granted these advantages, limiting fieldwork to one city only forecloses the option of a comparative analysis across Germany and decreases the generalizability of the findings. Kaidouha convincingly argues that this approach enables him to explore sensitive topics such as marital disputes, violence, and gender relations, because these aspects of life are not easily accessible without long-term engagement and trust. Kaidouha explicitly states that “the research relied on the empirical ethnographic methodology, as it is the best method for collecting qualitative data that is difficult to detect unless there are relationships of trust between the researcher and the research group” (p. 21). The study is anchored in three theoretical frameworks, namely segmented assimilation, masculinity in diaspora, and normative pluralism, together these theories structure the analytical approach of the research.

The second part outlines the causes of displacement (Ch. 2) and the challenges and changes (Ch. 3) that Syrian families face in Germany. Kaidouha effectively illustrates how displacement and asylum structures can contribute to family conflict. In the interviews, Kaidouha observed that many men are severely traumatized by the experience of displacement, which has a profound impact on their psychological well-being and the relationships with their families. Kaidouha points out that this period of separation destabilizes family roles and men’s authority within the family. Consequently, he identifies cultural and identity-related threats as a primary cause for tension within Syrian families in Germany. Many interviewees described being in a state of profound shock when they first arrived in Germany because they found the German culture to be very open and modern. Kaidouha explains this sense of a clash of cultures was mostly caused by “[t]he phenomenon of alcohol and weed, same-sex relationships activities in public, intimate kisses in the streets, revealing clothing, and the presence of places for sex industry” (p. 143). Moreover, interviewed parents reported to “have a fear of losing their children because of German society’s culture, customs, traditions, and ‘to be too open’” (p. 146). The fear of ‘losing’ their children refers to moral and cultural distancing, because parents worry that exposure to German society may encourage practices such as smoking, drinking alcohol, or engaging in premarital relationships, which they perceive as morally inappropriate, and which would create conflict with their religious and cultural values.

In the third part of his study, Kaidouha analyzes the reasons for family conflict (Ch. 4) and their management (Ch. 5). He claims that the main cause of conflict is the disruption of the patriarchal family structure resulting from migration to Germany. Kaidouha explains that in Germany, “[t]he man then feels that his authority, on which the family was founded and under which obedience from his family members is expected, is threatened, thus generating numerous conflicts between family members in general and between spouses in particular” (p. 179). He further highlights that the loss of employment, reliance on social welfare, and exposure to a legal system that promotes gender equality are responsible for the conflicts in Germany because these factors significantly weaken male authority and fuel marital disputes. Several interviewees described situations in which husbands used violence to exert control over their families, which Kaidouha interprets as a “[d]efensive mechanism to maintain his or her status within the family” (p. 183). The author provides empirical evidence showing how structural pressures reshape masculinity, gender roles, and authority within the household by grounding the argument in qualitative interviews and ethnographic observation.

For his analysis of conflict management within families, Kaidouha draws on the concept of normative pluralism. This framework highlights that family and community norms coexist with state law and often shape the preference to resolve conflicts privately within the family rather than through formal legal institutions. Based on the interviews, Kaidouha determines that Syrians often prefer to resolve conflicts through mediation by family, friends, or religious leaders rather than legal authorities, primarily due to their mistrust of bureaucratic systems and limited legal knowledge. He states, “[m]ore importantly, family affairs are broadly considered to be private matters, and there is no doubt that societal and cultural norms play a major role in the reluctance of many spouses, especially wives, to resort to the law, because of its association with ‘a shame culture’ referred to by some of the wives that were interviewed” (p. 207).

Another aspect of the study that is particularly insightful is the discussion of religious marriage and ‘limping marriages.’ According to Kaidouha, the term ‘limping marriages’ describes marriages that are recognized by a religion but not registered under German civil law. Kaidouha emphasizes that informal religious marriages particularly put women in a heightened state of

vulnerability because they may encounter obstacles when seeking a religious divorce. As Kaidouha explains, in certain interpretations of Islamic family law, women's access to divorce may be more restricted than men's: "Islam gives the woman the right to Khul', in which the wife returns the dowry to her husband or gives up her right to it and hence separates from him according to Sharia Law" (p. 236). Couples in these marriages face problems in divorce proceedings, difficulties claiming spousal maintenance, uncertainty in inheritance, complications regarding child custody, and residential status because religious recognition is not matched by legal protection.

In total, Kaidouha's study reveals trauma and cultural change as the main causes for conflicts within the family. Kaidouha argues that integration reshapes the power relations within families. In some cases, conflicts intensify when traditional authority structures are questioned within the German legal and social framework. Sometimes, these conflicts escalate to the point of violence, causing psychological repercussions that can lead to divorce. Furthermore, Kaidouha finds that having access to legal protection and institutional support is also often decisive for "many women's decisions to separate from their spouses" (p. 257). Consequently, traditional gender roles and family authority structures are renegotiated in this new environment. The study further highlights how cultural and religious identities are reinterpreted and renegotiated within a new social environment shaped by different normative expectations.

Overall, this book offers a comprehensive perspective on family conflicts within Syrian families in Germany. Moving beyond integration and migration policies, Kaidouha provides a nuanced understanding of these conflicts within the context of German society. He supports his arguments with qualitative ethnographic data, including detailed interviews, focus group discussions, and survey questionnaires. This well-researched book makes a significant contribution to migration studies and intercultural research. Moreover, legal scholars will find the study relevant because it provides a detailed discussion of family, Islamic law, and pluralism. It serves as a key reference for future research on Syrian refugees and normative pluralism in Europe.