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The Discursive Power of the "Good Wife": How Language Sustains Marital Violence among Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan

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Abstract This article examines how the "good wife" discursive canons influence Syrian refugee women's experiences of marital violence in Jordan. Drawing on narrative interviews with 33 Syrian refugee women, the analysis employs the feminist poststructuralist lens and Foucauldian discourse analysis to deconstruct the impact of language in gendered subjectivities reinforced by the "good wife" virtues of obedience, enduring patience, and self-sacrifice. Findings reveal a predilection towards the internalization of "good wife" canons among participants, evidenced by the use of self-blaming language that rationalizes violence and sanctions resistance. However, a minority of women successfully rejected the discursive constructs, metamorphosizing from passive to agentic subjective positionalities. The article emphasizes the role of language in not only mirroring but constituting power relations, thus affecting the conceptualization, tolerance and/or resistance to marital violence. The article recommends the rigorous interrogation of mainstream discourses that standardize marital violence while simultaneously curtailing women's expression of agency.

Keywords: *Discourse, Language, Marital violence, Subjectivity, Syrian refugees*

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1. Introduction

Marital violence is a particularly pernicious expression of gendered abuse, experienced by women in multiple sociocultural and geo-political contexts (Sardinha et al., 2022). Marital violence transcends the infliction of physical injury to include emotional, sexual, economic, and symbolic violence, often rooted within intimate marital systems supported by patriarchal dictates venerating the interdependent expression of male dominance and female suffering. The institutional and personal disregard towards marital violence is partially attributable to socially endorsed expectations of spousal loyalty and perpetual tolerance (Gomes et al., 2022; Gracia, 2004). The forced migration context exacerbates the complexity of marital violence dynamics, representing environments that enmesh pre-existing structural inequity with contextually fragile social orders

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and precarious humanitarian governance structures (Hourani et al., 2021). Refugee women experience stratified vulnerabilities, including restricted access to vital services, parlous legal status realities, and disproportionate exposure to gendered violence (El-Moslemany et al., 2024; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2018). The process of displacement- spanning across departure, transit, encampment, and resettlement- can engender or sustain marital violence iterations (Gokche & Kirdar, 2024; Horn et al., 2014). The displacement dynamics often obscure marital violence, regardless of the psychological and material implications for refugee women and girls (e.g., Dowllah et al., 2024).

Despite the shift in Syria's governance model in December 2024, Jordan continues to host over half a million registered Syrian refugees- a figure that has minimally fluctuated over the past decade (UNHCR, 2025). Displacement has exacerbated vulnerabilities for most Syrian women, exposing them to novel constraints and challenges in intimate settings (Daoud, 2020; UN Women, 2023). Family dynamics, cultural norms, humanitarian discourses, and religious dictates converge to shape their contextual experiences of marital violence. The scale and scope of marital violence against Syrian refugee women in Jordan have been documented by humanitarian institutions and academia (Anera, 2024; Gokche & Kirdar, 2024; Singh et al., 2022), albeit with a critical knowledge gap in understanding how the affected women articulate, ascribe meaning to, and position themselves within the occupied narrative realms.

This article exploits that gap by examining Syrian refugee women's narratives on marital violence exposure in Jordan, emphasizing the employed discursive frameworks. By applying the feminist poststructuralist theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis, the present article contextualizes language within the power nexus, where subjective identities are dynamically created and contested. The narrative interviews demonstrate that Syrian refugee women negotiate lived experiences through the medium of cultural and institutional discourses- some protracting violence by endorsing stoic endurance, while others pave the way for resistance through critique. Within the discursive epistemology, the recurrent "good wife" narrative- entrenched in values of sacrificial patience, piety, and deference- unfolds as an influential narrative that informs the women's justification, acquiescence, or resistance against violence within marital contexts. Assessing these narratives illuminates the moral and symbolic dynamics of marital violence in forced displacement environments, providing a nuanced analysis of how women negotiate agency and associated constraints under humanitarian governance conditions. This is examined through the following question:

Research Question: *How do Syrian refugee women in Jordan narrate their experiences of marital violence through culturally and institutionally mediated discursive frameworks?*

2. Theoretical Framework

The present article is informed by the Feminist Poststructuralist theory, best conceptualized as "a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change" (Weedon, 1997, p. 40). Its central tenets of language, discourse, and subjectivity provide an analytical lens to deconstruct the processes through which gendered hierarchies are sustained, challenged, and reimagined.

2.1. Language

In Feminist Postculturalist Theory, the perception of language as a passive medium for the expression of precedent meanings is debunked in favour of its conceptualization as an active agent in the generation of meaning (Gavey, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000; see also Momtaz et al., 2024). Language is not perceived as merely mirroring ideas, subjectivities, and/or experiences; instead it is perceived as shaping the realms of knowing and understanding the world. Willig (2013) stresses that finite and concrete meaning is incompatible with this framework, as language permits a plurality of interpretations mediated by particular social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. The theory espouses the production of meaning through discursively embedded language, challenging the view that language is inherently meaningful (Weedon, 1997; see also Akbari-Nassaji et al., 2023). Put differently, the extent to which an individual can derive meaning from an experience is necessarily predicated on the language through

which it is created and deconstructed. Consistent with Foucauldian canons, language is mired in discourse, is rarely impartial, but is instead mediated through ideological and historical dynamics (Gavey, 1989; see also Farhadytooli, 2025; Zhiyi, 2023). Consequently, language is pivotal in the construction of social realities, providing the interpretive lens through regulatory constraints on permissible feelings, expression, or knowledge in any context. Therefore, language critically establishes systems of meaning and symbolic structures that project our conceptualization of the world (Glynos et al., 2021; St. Pierre, 2000), transcending its communication use to shape how social relations and institutional power are created, sustained, and resisted (Scott, 1988; see also Farhadytooli, 2025). In the Feminist Postculturalist lens, language is simultaneously a site and conduit of power, facilitating the construction of subjectivities, engagement and resistance with normative structures, and the ability to ascribe meaning to lived experiences.

2.2. Discourse

In feminist postculturalism, discourse is conceptualized as a system of utterances, ideas, and behaviors that create and regulate meaning, epistemology, and subjectivities (Gavey, 1989; Macdonald, 2025). Discourses transcend linguistic expression to include social forces that are institutionally embedded, historically conditioned, and constantly evolving through dynamic power relations. Willig (2013) applies Foucauldian tenets to explain how discourses essentially shape context-specific norms of thought, language, and conduct, simultaneously validating some truths while omitting others. According to Gavey (2005), discourses provide the "socially understood ways, or rules almost, for talking about something and acting in relation to it" (p. 133), regulating both speech and behavior. Discourses specify who has agency to speak, the subject spoken about, as well as the conditions under which this occurs (St. Pierre, 2000), thus reinforcing socially constructed hierarchies and normative constraints. The perception of discourse as static or ubiquitously applicable is challenged, instead promoting their classification as historically conditioned, characterized by plurality and inherent contradictions (Foucault, 1972; Gavey, 2005; see also Martínez Aguilar et al., 2025). Mainstream discourses often achieve prominence due to institutional and cultural endorsement, while others are marginalized or diluted. Dominant discourses are often inculcated in early life stages and buttressed through socialization, normalizing them and undermining legitimate resistance (Gee, 2007). Mainstream or dominant discourses influence institutional conduct and norms, and are consequently perpetuated by the same systemic variables (Dziubaniuk et al., 2024; Weedon, 1997; Willig, 2013). However, it is essential to note that individuals are not passive absorbers of discourse, as they are inherently capable of resistance, alignment with marginal discourses, and/or the production of novel narratives that challenge the status quo (Gavey, 1989). From this perspective, language is a medium for the maintenance and upheaval of discourse (Willig, 2013). Weedon (1997) contends that resistance occurs when individuals critically reflect on dominant narratives and the underpinning ideological systems propping them. Therefore, discourse is vital to feminist poststructuralist analysis, proffering insights on the construction, contestation, and reimagination of epistemology, existential norms, and subjective positionalities.

2.3. Subjectivity

One of the foundational precepts of feminist poststructuralism is subjectivity, which refers to the process through which individuals assume subjectivities- how they perceive themselves relative to their external environment (Gavey, 2005). Weedon (1997) defines subjectivity as including both conscious and unconscious thoughts, feelings, and perceptions informing one's sense of self. Subjectivity is neither static nor inherent, instead being constructed through language and discourse (Gavey, 1989; Macdonald, 2025; Weedon, 1997). Since individuals are continually exposed to multiple, competing discursive norms, they assume positionalities that reflect the associated discursive norms, values, and assumptions (Rose, 2023; Wendt & Zannettino, 2015; Willig, 2013). Subjectivities orchestrate how individuals frame their lived experiences, define their positionalities, and interact with others. Mainstream discourses are uniquely placed to skirt critique and scrutiny, while subtly fortifying prevailing power relations and moulding subjective positionalities (Gavey, 2005; Slemon, 2025). Consequently, individuals may internalize normative impositions veiled behind socially constructed and contingent props. Nonetheless, feminist poststructuralism stresses the dynamism, plurality, and

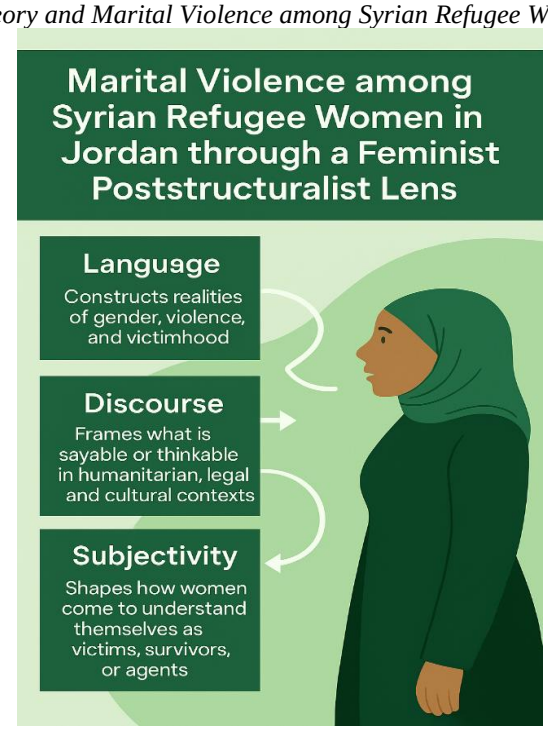
fluidity of subjectivity. The resistance to socially ascribed subject positionalities is contingent on critical reflection and discursive cognizance (e.g., Baaz et al., 2023; Rose, 2023). This repositioning process challenges hegemonic norms by fostering novel ontological expressions. As Weedon (1997) acknowledges, subjectivity is historically and socially embedded, providing opportunities for recalibration through reflective practice. Within this framework, the act of narration is synonymous with repositioning oneself within specific discursive realms, consequently framing how meaning is ascribed to self, others, and the environment (Weedon, 1997). Overall, feminist poststructuralism proffers a nuanced conceptualization of subjectivity as a malleable and contested site of power, identity, and prospects.

2.4. Why Feminist Poststructuralist Theory?

Feminist postculturalist theory is relevant to the current research as it orients discourse as a critical determinant of how marital violence experiences are conceptualized, relayed, and negotiated. By deconstructing how language creates meaning, it permits the exploration of how Syrian refugee women in Jordan understand their marital violence experiences in complex and mutually constitutive cultural, moral, and institutional systems. This vantage point highlights how subjectivity is shaped by discourse-how women actively position and are positioned within the available discursive narratives. In contexts typified by displacement, humanitarian governance, and entrenched gendered norms, feminist poststructuralism facilitates an in-depth analysis that engages with the complex and equivocal expressions women use to discuss injury, ownership, and agency. The centrality of contingency, incongruity, and power renders it especially pertinent in exploring the active construction and expression of meanings ascribed to marital violence experiences (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Feminist Poststructuralist Theory and Marital Violence among Syrian Refugee Women



3. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research design predicated on feminist poststructuralism and applying Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how Syrian refugee women in Jordan ascribe meaning to marital violence experiences. Language is viewed not as an impartial conduit but as a power site where subjectivities are constantly created and challenged through discursive narratives. This article deconstructs the discourse used by women to understand marital violence within the broader context of forced displacement and humanitarian governance.

Existing research indicates that Syrian refugee women invoke multiple discursive narratives- including cultural, religious, humanitarian, and moral iterations- to understand their marital violence experiences in Jordan. However, this article hones in on the "good wife' discourse, identified as particularly pervasive in influencing how women rationalized, accepted, or challenged violence in their marriages.

3.1. Participants

The research was conducted with 33 Syrian refugee women residing in urban host communities and the Zaatari Camp in Jordan. Four humanitarian organizations serving Syrian refugees collaborated in the participant recruitment process by facilitating contact with eligible women. Purposive sampling was applied to identify women exposed to marital violence during displacement, with the strategy justified by its association with depth and contextual relevance in qualitative research (e.g., Campbell et al., 2020; Dowllah et al., 2024). The sample was diverse with respect to age, education, marital history, and displacement duration (Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographic Characteristics

Variable	Participant Distribution
Syrian Region of Origin	Dara'a (9); Homs (8); Rural Damascus (7); Aleppo (5); Damascus (4)
Average Age (Range)	28.1 years (range: 18–46)
Educational Attainment	University Degree (11); Secondary School (7); Grade 11 (5); Grade 10 (4); Grade 9 (2); Grade 8 (2); Grade 7 (1); No Schooling (1)
Current Marital Status	Married (25); Divorced (8)
Average Number of Children	3.2 (range: 0–6 children)
Average Duration with Spouse	9.4 years (range: 1–28 years)
Years Residing in Jordan	Mean duration: 11.2 years
Current Residence in Jordan	Mafraq (13); Amman (10); Zaatari Refugee Camp (6); Karak (4)

3.2. Instrument

Data was collected through in-depth narrative interviews conducted by the principal researcher. Narrative interviews are conducive to the construction of meaning through storytelling, and therefore deemed ideal in exploring sensitive issues such as marital violence. The interview guide entailed open-ended probes into family dynamics, marital experiences, coping mechanisms, and moral reasoning. Interviews were conducted in participant-selected private settings and spanned between 120 and 150 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English through collaborative effort with a trained bilingual assistant. Emphasis was placed on maintaining the integrity of cultural idioms, metaphors, and rhetoric used across the spectrum of languages, thus adhering to best practices in cross-cultural qualitative research.

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted after securing approval from the pertinent institutional ethics committee. Participants were provided with a thorough explanation of the research purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time with no consequence. To guarantee emotional safety, interviews were conducted with trauma-informed sensitivity, with participants also offered referrals to psychosocial support services at the end of each session. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, and data were stored in password-protected, encrypted files only accessible to the research team.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

Data was assessed through Foucauldian discourse analysis, invoking Willig's (2013) interpretive framework, stressing the role of discourse in the creation of social realities, subject positionalities, and realms of action. NVivo 12 software facilitated coding and thematic analysis. The analytic process included:

- Thorough transcription focusing on participants' expressive language, tone, and affect;
- Classification of "marital violence" as the discursive object, encompassing all implicit or indirect allusions to coercion, control, or suffering;
- Delineation of discursive context and variance, focusing on how participants invoked religious, moral, and humanitarian frameworks;
- Examination of discursive devices, such as Qur'anic citations, idioms, and cultural proverbs;
- Evaluation of subjective positionalities, particularly the "good wife" identity, typified by enduring patience, moral sacrifice, and loyalty;
- Analysis of how these subjectivities facilitated or hindered the expression of agency, constructing choices on endurance, silence, or noncompliance;
- Evaluation of the role discourse plays in influencing participant subjectivities, moral reasoning, and conceptualization of self.

3.3.3. Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The principal researcher employed iterative coding, maintained comprehensive audit trails, and engaged in continuous peer debriefing sessions to guarantee credibility and trustworthiness (Kowalski et al., 2024; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The principal researcher's positionality- as a female academic experienced in humanitarian contexts- was documented in a reflexive journal to understand how it may impact data collection and interpretation. Research transferability was enhanced by thick descriptions and transparent methodological strategies.

4. Findings

4.1. The "Good Wife" Discourse

Feminist poststructuralism portrays female oppression as necessarily mirrored and sustained through a plurality of discursive narratives, including that of the "good wife". This discourse creates and fortifies normative ideals that deconstruct the "good wife" as nurturing, supportive, patient, and devout, in an obligation to the prioritization of her husband's needs and desires ahead of her own. In the Jordanian Syrian refugee community, the "good wife" discourse is pervasive and influential. Among the 33 participants, 28 internalized their canons and expressed them in their explanation and rationalization of marital violence experiences. Regardless of its permeation, two participants resisted or refuted its underlying assumptions, ostensibly launching themselves toward emancipation from marital violence (see Table 2).

4.1.1. Loyalty as Duty: Enduring Marital Violence through the "Good Wife" Lens

Syrian refugee women evoked the "good wife" discourse to express their patient, supportive, and tolerant outlook towards their spouses- regardless of any exposure to marital violence. The interiorization of the discourse has arguably oppressed women by reiterating narratives that apportion blame to them for marital violence experiences, simultaneously inhibiting them from disclosing their experiences, seeking appropriate recourse, or initiating divorce. Sumaya, a 37-year-old participant recounted:

Our life in Syria was all right. We sometimes had disputes, but he [Sumaya's husband] never got to the point of beating me. I have endured a lot of violence from him here in Zaatari… It is not just physical; he also treats me badly and insists on humiliating me...But to be realistic with you [the researcher], the problem is my tongue. I provoke him to hit me. I actually deserve it [the violence]. I allow it to happen, as keeping silent would resolve the situation … I tend to wind him up and our battles begin, and I just receive it [the violence] and receive it… His situation is difficult... He is frustrated, strained, and

irritated all the time because he cannot work and provide for us. He just vents all this on me. There is nothing to do here in the Zaatari… However, I cannot leave him; my role should be supporting him through thick and thin. I challenge his authority by talking back and sometimes reacting in anger and as a wife, this is not acceptable. I should try to be a proper wife who is less confrontational, especially now in these circumstances… He beat me hard once, and that time I had not provoked him in any way, so I thought of reporting him to the FPD [Police], but in truth I could not do it [reporting her husband to the FPD] because the respectable wife has to be patient with her husband… I then tried to inform my mother, who also lives here in the Zaatari; however, she said to me: "The decent wife does not hang her dirty laundry in public. Work to improve it [the marriage], Sumaya, especially now, to guarantee my satisfaction. I have got my eyes on you. Everyone has their eyes on you. You cannot be a terrible wife. This is not the way I raised you."

Sumaya's self-narrative attests to the deeply entrenched nature of the "good wife" discourse in Syrian refugee women's psyche. Her narrative frames her own conduct as confrontational and provocative, essentially warranting or legitimizing violence from her spouse. Her subjective positionality seeks to reconcile her conduct with the prescribed canons of the "good wife", fostering an innate desire to express perpetual patience even in the face of adversity. Within the associated discursive constraints, perceived aggression from the female is necessarily equated with disrespect and an unsavoury challenge to the patriarchal authoritative prerogative. Sumaya's perception of her lived experiences alludes to the existence of a causative dynamic between her conduct and subsequent exposure to marital violence. Her internalization of the narrative that she "allowed" the violence to occur inadvertently positions Sumaya as an active agent with the capacity to mitigate or avert abuse by exhibiting the "good wife" virtues. Her reflections, such as her view that she "winds up" her husband, may also reflect rhetorical import, either highlighting her perceived incitement of violence that insulates her spouse from any responsibility or, alternatively, the existence of reciprocity in the marriage. The metaphorical use of terms such as "battle" further obscures the distinction between victim and perpetrator, hinting towards mutuality. Self-blaming narratives are not unique to Sumaya, as other participants, including Sameeha and Muna, echoed the same rationale. These women used discursive tools such as justification to explain and understand their exposure to marital violence:

"He is frustrated because he is unemployed. He is also tired... I am the only one he can vent his frustration on…Let me admit that it is also my fault. It is not the right time to provoke him. I am the reason that he hits me." (Sameeha, 39-year-old Syrian woman)

"I blame most of the violence on myself. He [Muna's husband] says he hits me because of what I do. Perhaps it is my fault, for instance, I should not pressurize him, considering his current circumstances." (Muna, 42-year-old Syrian woman)

The acute impact of internalized self-blame is the exculpation of male ownership in inflicting marital violence in Jordan. Syrian women's proclivity towards internalized culpability drastically dilutes the probability of disclosing violence or seeking recourse, thus amplifying the social and psychological trauma on themselves and their children.

Sumaya's narrative lucidly highlights the active embrace of the "good wife" discourse enshrined through her self-prescribed mandate to quell confrontational behaviours in favor of idealized patience and tolerance. This sentiment was echoed by other participants, who similarly recounted mindful efforts to refrain from spousal provocation towards embodying the aspirational virtues associated with the "good wife". The striking uniformity of these perspectives attests to the pervasive impact of socialization and consequential internalization of the discursive narrative. Paradoxically, the same socialization process becomes a mechanism for entrapment by delegitimizing divorce as a viable response to marital violence in Jordan.

"…I have to stop provoking him. I know that I have to become a better wife and stand by my husband through good and bad times. These are currently the bad times; I should stay with him and support him in spite of his aggression…" (Sameeha, 39-year-old Syrian woman)

"My older sister told me that I should be patient with my husband despite troubling circumstances or setbacks. I should stop confronting him… I cannot leave him." (Muna, 42-year-old Syrian woman)

Sumaya's contention that "the respectable wife has to be patient with her husband" epitomizes the discursive authority attached to the 'good wife', legitimizing her decision not to engage the Family Protection Department (FPD), i.e., the police. Her narrative elucidates the intricate moral dilemma confronting Syrian refugee women: the mandate to reconcile behaviour and conduct with the "good wife" discourse against the necessity of seeking refuge from marital violence-fraught environments. Alignment with the "good wife" discourse essentially compels Syrian women to assume responsibility for their spouse's well-being, thus facing the risk of stigmatization and censure as a "bad wife" should the husband's violence be reported. This paradigm illuminates a sweeping lack of cognizance about the inherent dangers of marital violence against Syrian women.

"…no, of course not. Yes, I come here regularly to talk to the counselor, but nothing more. I cannot be that bad woman and report him to the FPD in such circumstances…" (Muna, 42-year-old Syrian woman)

"Reporting him to the police is not an option for me. It is terrible in my community, especially now, if a wife files a complaint against her husband." (Sameeha, 39-year-old Syrian woman)

"I was raised in a family where taking your husband to jail is very shameful. It is like you are a terrible woman if you imprison him." (Balsam, 37-year-old Syrian woman)

The "good wife" discourse, among Syrian women in Jordan, is further fortified by social institutions such as the family unit. For example, when Sumaya sought advice from her mother, the latter explicitly encouraged conformity to the "good wife" virtues and deliberate effort to preserve the marriage, thus inadvertently exacerbating the incidence of marital violence. In this manner, Sumaya's mother invoked the Arabic maxim "The decent wife does not hang her dirty laundry in public", subtly synonymizing reporting marital violence with being a "bad wife". Additionally, the "dirty laundry" metaphor reiterates the expectation to conceal exposure to marital violence, which is framed as a familial issue restricted to the private domain. The calibration of marital violence as an internal family matter is a core determinant of Syrian women's response to violence in Jordan. Several participants recounted facing intense familial pressure to avoid exposing marital violence incidents in the public realm:

"Disclosing marital violence experiences is unacceptable. I am trapped by my reality as I cannot openly discuss this. Talking with you [the researcher] makes me feel better, as well as talking to the counselor whom I trust." (Aliya, 38-year-old Syrian woman)

"In our culture, it is natural to maintain secrecy about as much as possible. The reality is pretending as though everything were fine." (Fatima, 44-year-old Syrian woman)

The peremptory advice from Sumaya's mother to "work to improve it (the marriage)" highlights the normative mandate to maintain marital relations regardless of violence exposure. Such advice unwittingly regularizes, endorses, and fortifies marital violence by actively dissuading women from seeking recourse. The interviews captured the poignant exposure of abused women to familial misrecognition of violence, intended to avoid divorce, and correlated financial burdens of accommodating their daughters and grandchildren in Jordan. According to some participants, family members had vehemently reiterated their absolute dependence on their husbands, sanctioning supportive behaviours that overlook exposure to violence. Recurrent Arabic maxims invoked by the participants included: "the wife's house is her grave," "the wife has nothing in her life but her husband," and "you were married in a white dress and the only way you will leave is in a white shroud."

An equally striking feature of the "good wife" discourse lies in its disciplinary authority, evidenced by Sumaya's mother's unequivocal instructions to recalibrate her behaviour in accordance with the discursive dictates of a "good wife". The principal strategies deployed to cement control over Sumaya were surveillance and normalization. Surveillance was explicitly relayed through comments such as "I have got my eyes on you. Everyone has their eyes on you", signaling the panoptical prowess of family and society. The perpetual gaze fosters compliance with "good wife" tenets as deviation from that

idealized norm is perceived as shameful. Normalization was expressed in her mother's overt efforts to frame marital violence disclosure as aberrant, while cautioning Sumaya to 'correct' her behaviour accordingly. Moreover, Sumaya's mother utilized the reward mechanism by aligning adherence to the "good wife" canons with maternal approval- "to guarantee my satisfaction". A pervasive element across Arab cultures is the imperative to gain parental approval, as children are often socialized to meet parental expectations, regardless of personal desires and/or impact on well-being. In making sense of her marital violence experiences, Sumaya internalized the dominant discursive narrative, assuming the unwitting role of actively participating in her own subjugation by feeling compelled to embody the "good wife".

4.1.2. Resistance to the "Good Wife" Discourse

Two of the research participants, Nawal and Dalal, managed to resist the dictates of the "good wife" discourse by utilizing a proactive approach. Both women overtly challenged the expectation of passivity by seeking recourse from the Family Protection Department (FPD) in Jordan to mitigate against marital violence exposure. Consequently, Nawal was granted a divorce, while Dalal opted to remain in the marriage, provided the immediate cessation of marital violence. Dala, a 37-year-old participant, narrated:

… I realized that accepting violence no longer made sense to me. He did not like that I started my home-based income-generating project. My business initiated the problems between us, and since then, his violence has escalated. It is like you have a voice in the house because you are the main provider for your family. However, this [Dalal becoming the main provider in the family], in addition to other reasons, made him so angry and violent against me… Although I was physically alive, I felt deflated. I could not disclose the violence or vent my anger because I had to be the good wife who was silent and committed to making her marriage successful. With the course of time, I realized that the fault was not with me, but that there was something innately wrong with him... I reported him to the FPD… I asked myself several questions before filing a complaint against him: What will my family think?, what will my in-laws say?, and how will my friends feel?. I do not know the source of the courage to file a complaint against him. But I did it… I simply realized that being a patient wife will not bring any result. I came to the conclusion that I do not want to be a good woman for him, I do not want to be patient and supportive at the expense of my happiness… My husband knew his limits after that point, and he subsequently stopped beating me after I reported him. I feel justified in my decision to break that kind of control over me. I feel free now because I succeeded in changing something in my life.

Dalal's narrative highlights a fundamental shift in the conceptualization and attribution of marital violence, reflected in her insight that "the fault was not with me, but that there was something innately wrong with him." This vantage point shift facilitated her rejection of demure "good wife" constructs, manifesting in decisive action in reporting marital violence to the FPD. In this manner, Dalal reconfigured marital violence attribution in addition to questioning the import of the "good wife" discourse. This is evident in her assertions that "I simply realized that being a patient wife will not bring any result", and "I do not want to be a good woman for him; I do not want to be patient and supportive at the expense of my happiness." Dalal's decision to involve the FPD attests to critical awareness and the deliberate exercise of agency to extricate herself from marital violence exposure. The decision also mirrors her transformation from a passive subjectivity towards alignment with resistance consistent with feminist perspectives on anti-oppression. Her pursuit of legal remedy recalibrated her sense of self as an active and empowered agent capable of disencumbering herself from perpetual abuse.

Prior to filing a complaint with the FPD, Dalal engaged in critical internal dialogue illustrated by probing questions such as: "What will my family think?," "What will my in-laws say?," and "How will my friends feel?" Dalal's reflective practice unveiled anxiety about the reception (or lack thereof) of her stance by prominent members of her social network. Her misgivings can be attributed to a desired aversion from the "bad wife" label, as involving authorities is widely perceived as contravening socioculturally embedded norms. The range of interrelated relational dynamics Dalal considered demonstrates the ubiquitous influence of communal expectations in constraining women's decisions. Despite the gravity of her contemplations, Dalal ultimately prioritized her personal well-being regardless of implications in the public opinion court.

Dala's experiences underscore the extent to which the "good wife" discourse inhibits women's capacity to comprehensively understand the nature of marital violence and the risks attached to remaining in abusive marital relationships. The deeply embedded nature of the "good wife" discourse- and its fortification by social institutions and systems- legitimizes its adoption within the Syrian refugee community in Jordan. In contrast, unconventional narratives focusing on women's empowerment struggle to gain cultural traction. Nonetheless, Dalal successfully tapped into the empowerment discourse to exercise agency in a manner that stops her exposure to marital violence. Initially, Dala's subjective positionality and interpretation of marital violence were mediated by the "good wife" discourse, illustrated by her self-characterization as "deflated" and her decision to suppress anger to conform to the discursive ideals. Over time, Dalal's subjective positionality converged with the empowerment discourse as evidenced in her assertion:

"I feel justified in my decision to break that kind of control over me. I feel free now because I succeeded in changing something in my life."

Dalal's assertion is significant as it marks a profound paradigmatic shift in her internal dialogue. Her active voice is consistent with reclaimed agency and elevated self-awareness. Her narrative provides a glimpse into her evolution from past to present: from passivity and emotional cowing to empowerment and active reproach. This psychological shift converged with a shift in self-conceptualization, paving the way for autonomous action to end her exposure to abuse. Dalal notes that her resistance to the "good wife" discourse was the root of her emancipation. Her rejection of the mainstream discourse facilitated the construction of an alternative, personal narrative grounded in autonomy, self-worth, and the quest for emancipation.

Table 2
Discursive Construction of Marital Violence under the 'Good Wife' Theme

Sub-Theme	Definition	Discursive Construction	Discourses Invoked	Subject Position	Practice and Agency	Effects on Subjectivity
Loyalty as Duty: Enduring Marital Violence Through the "Good Wife" Lens	The perceived obligation to remain with a violent husband as a marker of moral loyalty and familial commitment.	Violence is normalized as a test of loyalty and patience; confronting the husband is viewed as disrespectful.	'Good wife' discourse, religious duty, family honor.	Submissive, enduring wife who preserves family integrity.	Silence, endurance, rejection of help-seeking, internalization of guilt.	Self-blame, shame, emotional suppression, trapped identity.
Resistance to the "Good Wife" Discourse	Instances where women reject dominant discourses, reframe blame, and take actions to alter their situations and reclaim agency.	Violence is reframed as unjust; the husband's behavior is questioned, and accountability is sought.	Empowerment discourse, feminist ideals, legal/human rights.	Autonomous woman asserting rights and redefining her identity.	Seeking help, reporting violence, initiating change, setting conditions for staying or leaving.	Empowerment, self-worth, psychological freedom, new self-narratives.

5. Discussion

This article sought to examine Syrian refugee women's marital violence narratives, focusing on the pervasive "good wife" discourse operating in culturally and institutionally mediated discursive constructs. The deeply inculcated discourse venerates traits of female subservience, loyalty, and endurance, thus constructing how women perceive their own agency, culpability, and recourse avenues to challenge marital violence in a difficult context of forced displacement. Drawing on the feminist poststructuralist theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis illuminated the role of language in creating

prevalent relational power dynamics, ultimately shaping the conceptualization, tolerance, or resistance of marital violence within this vulnerable population cohort. The present article is especially relevant considering the protracted nature of the displacement context in Jordan, wherein long-term encampment and host community integration inflated pre-existing vulnerabilities and gendered pressures.

The research findings show that most participants- 28 out of 33, or 84.8%- internalized the "good wife" discursive constructs by interpreting marital violence through self-blaming narratives that not only legitimized marital violence but simultaneously dampened any meaningful resistance. This internalization, echoed by extant literature, attests to the acute impact of patriarchal norms and cultural impositions on women's intimate violence experiences (Saunders et al., 2023). According to current research, women aligning their conduct with the "good wife" are disproportionately exposed to abuse in intimate relationships (Ab Kadir & Nen, 2025; Daibes & Safadi, 2023; Dekel & Andipatin, 2016; Gomes et al., 2022). A pertinent example is Sumaya's self-perception as provocative and aggressive, which she causally relates to marital violence inflicted by her husband. The "good wife" discourse therefore frames resistance as deviation from the idealized wifely virtues, essentially shifting responsibility and accountability from the perpetrator to the victim. Other participant narratives validate this claim by similarly ascribing marital violence to themselves, attributing their supposed spousal goading to assertiveness or limited empathy with the spouse's circumstances. The ubiquitous nature of self-blame among Syrian refugee women in Jordan insulates the male from marital violence ownership, echoing a phenomenon that is widely documented in environments with deep-seated patriarchal gender roles (Güler et al. 2023; Naismith et al. 2022; Renehan et al. 2023; Saunders et al. 2023). In displacement contexts, the mandate to subscribe to the "good wife" discourse is arguably amplified by vulnerability intersections, precarious legal status, and restricted social support systems that complicate the feasibility of overt remonstration.

The present article demonstrated that the "good wife" discourse transcends individualized internalization as it is propped, fortified, and reproduced by a range of social institutions, particularly the family. Sumaya's mother's advice to "work to improve it" and to refrain from "hang(ing) her dirty laundry in public" sharply exposes the influence of familial structures in standardizing and exacerbating abuse by cautioning against disclosure or seeking recourse. This finding is consistent with existing research positing that intense familial and community expectations significantly impede abused women from reporting marital violence or seeking recourse (Green et al., 2024; Güler et al., 2023). The repeated interpretive reliance on Arabic maxims, including "the wife's house is her grave" or "the wife has nothing in her life but her husband" emphasizes the deep entrenchment of "good wife" expectations in the cultural realm, essentially ensnaring women by venerating endurance as the ideal response to marital violence. The disciplinary capacity embedded in this discourse- as conceptualized by Foucault (1979)- relies on panoptic practices and normalization, thus fostering compliance as an aversion mechanism against social shaming, and the best pathway to attain parental approval. Paradoxically, this also translates into women such as Sumaya becoming active participants in their own suppression. In displacement contexts, traditional and typically patriarchal social norms may become fortified as a coping strategy against upheaval and uncertainty, creating an environment in which the "good wife" discourse can thrive, further restricting women's perceived avenues for marital violence redress. Displacement often decimates traditional male economic roles, ostensibly inflaming male controlling behaviours and heightening women's vulnerability, despite women's tendency to assume new economic roles in such contexts (Daoud, 2020).

From a feminist postculturalist approach, the research findings attest to the constitutive prowess of the "good wife" discourse, actively constructing women's subjective positionalities as opposed to simply reflecting pre-existing values. Gavey (1989) and Weedon (1997) posit that language is a medium through which meaning, identities, and the realms of action are constantly created and challenged. The participants' narratives transcend beyond mere descriptions of injury, but are discursively entrenched notions of moral positioning. The proclivity towards self-blame, stoic endurance, and aversion to abuse disclosure was not merely reflective of survival mechanisms; instead it revealed deliberate alignment with the prevalent mainstream discourse that intertwines womanhood with self-denial, spousal loyalty, and perpetual patience. The "good wife" discourse simultaneously operates in the regulatory realm, dictating women's experience of violence in marital relationships in addition to moderating how the

audience, nature, and circumstances under which marital violence is disclosed or discussed. The discourse legitimizes 'undesirable' subject positionalities- such as the divorcee or the woman reporting violence from her husband to authorities- as morally defective or social pariahs, creating an imperative to remain in abusive relationships regardless of material or emotional considerations. However, expressions of resistance observed in a minority of participants (such as Nawal and Dalal) underscore the contingent and malleable nature of subjective positionalities within the poststructuralist framework. The women's ability to identify with and articulate alternative narratives rooted in concepts of empowerment and safety alludes to the dynamism of subjectivity, through which women can reconstruct their identities within contested discursive realms that pave the way for critique and evolution.

The research findings provide significant value to both academia and evidence-based practice in contexts of protracted displacement. In relation to the former, the present article adds to the epistemology on sociolinguistic (e.g., Al-Ajalein et al., in press) and gender-based interpretations of violence by illuminating the discursive function of the "good wife" narrative as both a reflection of the societal status quo and an active catalyst of imbalance power relations and women's conceptualization of injury. Displacement settings that are typified by the erosion of traditional structures except patriarchy often represent thriving ground for such discourses, standardizing abuse and restricting women's exercise of agency. The present article highlights the prerogative to critically deconstruct dominant moral frameworks that are pervasive in humanitarian settings, especially those informing silence, self-blame, or stoic acceptance of violence in marital relationships. In relation to the latter, the present research findings underscore the mandate to depart from uniform interventions towards discourse-sensitive approaches. Practitioners must acknowledge that while displacement often erodes traditional structures, women's responses to violence may be substantially rooted in the vestiges of powerful social and cultural norms. In such contexts, it is imperative to promote a plurality of discourses that can ostensibly promote safety and well-being by venerating dignity, rights, and resistance. The present article is not without limitations. The findings reflect the qualitative experiences of a specific group of Syrian refugee women residing in Jordan, potentially restricting the generalizability of the research to other displaced populations. Additionally, challenges such as limited privacy, reliance on gatekeepers, and translation dilution are typically associated with humanitarian research and are equally applicable in the present research context.

Future research could probe into how protracted displacement moulds and recalibrates gendered discourses. Comparative studies across different refugee communities- such as Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh or Congolese refugees in Uganda- could expose how the "good wife" discourse manifests across different sociocultural and geopolitical environments. Longitudinal research monitoring the evolution of women's subjectivities over time- particularly those challenging mainstream discursive ideals- would provide invaluable insight into underlying processes of agency and resilience. Future research could also explore the efficacy of interventions that overtly resist pernicious gender discourses, using valid and reliable measurement instruments such as remedial action, disclosure rates, and psychosocial well-being indicators. Finally, considering the narratives of men in displaced communities is critical in understanding the processes through which patriarchal discourses are sustained or rebuffed, facilitating the design of holistic, comprehensive, and gender-transformative approaches that resonate with specific displacement environments and populations.

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