Abstract – IPC 2025

Session: Forced Displacement and Statelessness in Host Countries

(Dis)placement as a Recurring Event over the Life Course: A Pilot Study using Life History Calendars among Resettled Syrian Refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand

Extended Abstract

Background

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024), there were around 117.3 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, 13.8 million of which were Syrians who remained forcibly displaced in 137 countries at the end of 2023. This paper focuses on forcibly displaced Syrians but rather than taking forced displacement as a point of departure, it traces people's mobility from birth till resettlement, and hence is unique in its ability to investigate the effect of war on forced displacements as a series of transitions over individuals' life courses. This stems from the paucity of data (that is longitudinal in nature) that allows for such an endeavour among people seeking refuge from war (Hugo, Abbasi-Shavazi & Kraly 2018). This paper fills this gap by piloting the use of Life History Calendars (LHCs) to collect such data from the resettled Syrian Refugee Population in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter, New Zealand). While only resettling a small fraction out of the total number of refugees worldwide, New Zealand has formally committed to resettling 750 refugees annually since 1989 (Marlow et al 2024). Starting in 2020, the government has increased the quota to include 1500 people and has managed to accept (on top of its formal quota) an average of 178 asylum seekers as refugees annually (Marlow et al 2024; Ferns et al 2022).

Data and Research Methods

To investigate the relationship between war and forced displacement over the life course among people seeking refuge, our overall paper pilot tests the use of LHCs. Although LHCs have been used extensively to study life course transitions, this project is unique to utilise them among people seeking refuge. LHCs are reliable methods for collecting retrospective longitudinal data on multiple simultaneous events (Belli, Stafford, Alwin 2009) and perform quite well in minimizing memory loss as they are designed in a way that enhances memory retrieval (Morselli et al 2016, p181). By design, the LHC is a two-way grid with temporal dimensions including time units such as months or years on one side and different life domains on the other (Axinn, Pearce, Ghimire 1999). The latter includes substantive indicators applicable to the study (Morselli et al 2016; Axinn, Pearce, Ghimire 1999). For this paper, these include residential mobility to reflect displacement. Respondents report events for each life domain by relating them to what happened in other life domains or in relation to other time markers. As such, respondents can visualise their life trajectory linking what happened to when, where it happened, and for

how long it lasted making it possible to relate events to social and historical contexts (Morselli et al 2016, p.181, 187). Large body of evidence has documented the effectiveness of LHCs in reporting retrospective data compared to conventional questionnaires including life events such migration, marital transitions and family behaviour (Yabiku 2004), political violence (Barber et al 2016), and domestic violence Yoshihama et al 2002). This is because LHC facilitates memory retrieval through more than one channel; hierarchy (from more to least important), sequence (in chronological order), and in relation to other events (Morselli et al 2016, p.182). It is also flexible and allows interviewers to probe and verify the timing of events if discrepancies exist, encourages rapport, and facilitates interaction between the interviewer and the respondent (Belli 1998). Its visual nature is another unique feature that allows for any inconsistencies to be resolved with the respondent during the interview (Freedman et al 1988). Because the LHC approach allows to track the history of events and incidents uncovering patterns of behaviours over time, the kind of data generated fits very well with event history analysis (EHA) modelling techniques (Allison 1984) and hence have been applied very broadly in quantitative research while applications in qualitative research have received much less attention (Harris and Parisi 2007). However, by including open-ended questions to follow up on major life course events, the LHC can provide a nuanced tool to gather information on "how the process of changing from one status to another is interpreted and shaped by actors and their environment … so that each event can be incorporated into an autobiographical narrative" (Harris and Parisi 20018, p. 41). Therefore, this paper leverages the potential of LHCs to generate *both* quantitative and qualitative data to investigate the relationship between war and forced displacement over the life course among Syrian people seeking refuge.

Piloted among a small sample of resettled Syrian refugee women in Aotearoa New Zealand (n=40) across three settlement sites (Waikato-Hamilton, Wellington and Dunedin), the paper discusses the potential and pitfalls of leveraging such an approach among people seeking refuge. The focus is on the period of young adulthood (ages 15-30) by comparing the experiences of residential mobility including displacement from two birth cohorts born in the 1980s and 1990s. Around 20 women from each of the following target population were interviewed. *1980s cohort*: These women would have reached age 30 largely before the onset of civil war so their early life experiences are characterized by relative stability. Their lives would have been impacted at later ages when their families had already been formed and they were forced into displacement. This later age experience is of interest because these women are to a large extent the mothers of the newly arrived Syrian refugee children. *1990s cohort:* Civil war started when these women were in the period of young adulthood, the ages of principal interest (ages 15-30). They experienced the brunt of civil war, through education disruption, forced displacement disrupting their life transitions.

Expected Findings

The paper will first outline the lessons learnt from applying the LHCs to a population seeking refuge. It will summarise the steps that were taken in designing the LHC, the process of building relationships with key stakeholders in the settlement sector including service providers and local community organisations across the three sites of settlement, the measures that were taken to adapt the usual approach taken in the literature (focusing on national events as an anchor for memory retrieval which for the Syrian population in particular was a cause of strife as it became apparent in initial Focus Group Discussions), and finally the process of including open ended questions to follow up on major life events data reported in the LHCs to understand how the process of displacement is interpreted and shaped by shaped by participants' personal and contextual circumstances. The paper then concludes by reporting on some of the descriptive quantitative and qualitative findings from this pilot study and outline the potential and pitfalls of using LHCs to study displacement of people seeking refuge.

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