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# Parenthood responsibility in forced migration: Syrian parents with young children keep braving the Mediterranean Sea

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## Abstract:

In my PhD research entitled ‘(Re-)Interpreting rationalities of Syrian refugees’ risky journeys to Europe: dance between despair and wisdom’, I have collected life stories of Syrian women and men who have arrived in Europe via clandestine routes. Their accounts narrating what has become known as a ‘journey of violence’ are amalgams of extreme feelings and states of mind. The testimonies are reflections of bravery, creativity, commitment, sadness and despair. However, parents of young children found themselves grappling with another emotion. They faced a troubling moral dilemma for having brought their children on these journeys in pursuit of a better future for them.

**Key words:** Refugees, Parenthood, Risk, Responsibility

## Being a parent in forced migration.

Under circumstances like those in the war in Syria, parents’ responsibility to guarantee the well-being of their children requires deciding to go on a risky ‘journey of violence’ (Borges, 2023)<sup>2</sup> that often involves a sea or desert crossing organized by smugglers. The journey encompasses various legal and physical spaces of which some parts are made in a clandestine manner, whereby the notion of clandestine is defined as a hidden, yet known dimension of social reality, which results in the vulnerability of the population and their invisibility to legal protections (Cetta Mainwaring and Noelle Brigden, 2016)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Borges, G. M. (2023). Journey of Violence: Refugee Women’s Experiences Across Three Stages and Places. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 1–21. <https://doi-org.ludwig.lub.lu.se/10.1007/s12134-023-01102-z>

<sup>3</sup> Mainwaring, C., and Brigden, N. (2016) Beyond the Bborder: Celandestine Mmigration Jjourneys. *Geopolitics*, 21(2), pp. 243-262.





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Undoubtedly, their engagement in clandestine migration is an expression of their vulnerability that arose from their position of not having a meaningful alternative to undertaking a risky migration route. Families in forced migration involving clandestine border crossing resort to different traveling arrangements. Although the scenes provided by mass media can lead to the assumption that those who arrive in Europe by the sea are predominantly men, an informed take on the gender composition disapproves it. Some families indeed chose to have a head of family (usually a man) travel to Europe alone, after which the rest of family joined him via the reunification pathway. However, the compassion of the people on boats is diverse and escapes easy profiling. That is especially true for Syrian refugees. Tiny boats in which they have crossed the Mediterranean Sea to arrive in Europe have carried entire families, including very young children. With family reunification pathways in the EU countries becoming ever lengthier and more uncertain, parents fear that their family risks remaining fractured and separated until the unforeseeable future if they travel without their children.

### Outsourcing responsibility: from policy to individuals

Children on boats or crossing the desert on foot are perceived as troublesome even when accompanied by parents. The sight of them is met with a lack of understanding for such a parental decision among general audiences as well as among refugees who crossed the sea or desert but, for different reasons, did not take the children with them. The event that provoked the strongest reaction from the wider public was the death of Alan Kurdi in 2015. The photo of the Syrian toddler's lifeless body on the beach provoked contradictory reactions, from blaming the parents to pointing at the responsibility of the international community, notably the EU.

Taking a stance on ethical parenthood in forced migration involves considering various moral and humanitarian principles, as well as the factors that drive families and individuals to make such choices. It is important to emphasize that moral responsibility hinges upon the presence of free will as a fundamental prerequisite, yet freedom implies the availability of a different course of action (Hayenhjelm, 2018)<sup>4</sup>. If a parent is to be held morally responsible for bringing a child on a perilous migration journey, it implies that the parent should have had alternative options available, whether that means taking a different action or choosing to do nothing.

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<sup>4</sup>Hayenhjelm, M. (2018). Risk Impositions, Genuine Losses, and Reparability as a Moral Constraint. *Ethical Perspectives* 25 (3):419-446.





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In the context of the Syrian war, it is essential to recognize that opting for no action carried significant risks. Empirical evidence indicates that refraining from migration would subject children to a distinct yet substantial risk, whether in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East. For instance, data from the Syrian Network of Human Rights<sup>5</sup> reveals that since the onset of the conflict in Syria, approximately 30,000 children have lost their lives. Moreover, in neighbouring Turkey, the data also reveals that 75 percent of Syrian school-age children have been unable to access education, with child labor becoming increasingly prevalent.

The moral evaluation of an action is contingent upon its relationship to other available choices of action. The moral responsibility of parents in the context of forced migration should be considered in the light of whether there is a risk-free alternative, rather than merely another course of action such as staying instead of leaving, choosing another trajectory or resorting to a different family arrangement. People's agency should be understood not just as the ability to choose differently but as the ability to choose what one desires.

For refugees, the desired alternative is a risk-free alternative, i.e., a safe pathway to seek asylum in Europe. Such desired alternatives can be restricted or eliminated by governing structures, as is the case of Syrians. Hence, the moral responsibility attributed to Syrian parents braving the sea with young children is intricately connected to structural violence since it is a consequence of migration-related policies. Nevertheless, it goes unjustly outsourced to the individual level and assigned solely to parents.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://snhr.org> <https://snhr.org>

