



DIGITAL FEMINIST FUTURITIES FROM THE MARGIN:

*Refugee Women Experiences
with Juxtapolitical Publics*

By

Dr. Katty Alhayek

Introduction

In the context of the 2011 Syrian uprising-turned-war, I left Syria in the spring of 2012. I was in my early twenties, and the hope I had held for a fairer, more inclusive future—free from authoritarianism, sexism, inequality, and other forms of oppression—had vanished.

I was learning—through my own experiences and the shared struggles of fellow feminist and young activists who had also believed in the early promise of the “Arab Spring” movements in countries like Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—that achieving structural change is profoundly difficult. Authoritarian, classist, capitalist, and patriarchal forces always seem to find their way back to power in one form or another.

This lesson was reinforced during the years I spent in the United States (2012–2021), where I witnessed and participated in the racial justice movement. There, I observed firsthand how white supremacy—as a system and structure—reasserts its dominance through ideological co-optation, institutional durability, and adaptive strategies manifested in the rise of Trump (Alexander et al. 2017; Brown 2015; Giroux and McLaren 1994; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Zeno 2017).

During these years, I lived through the displacement of half of Syria’s pre-war population of 22 million, which includes over 7.4 million internally and more than 6 million around the world in more than 130 countries (UNHCR 2025). In the

diaspora, I was following how Syrian women, like myself, in countries such as Germany and the United States faced economic, social, and cultural challenges in integrating into their new societies, while also contending with the colonial gaze and the dehumanization of “Arab” and Muslim women (Abu-Lughod 2002; Alhayek 2014). In facing such challenges, I witnessed the resilience of many Syrian women who formed digital communities, such as *Syrische Frauen in Deutschland* (i.e. Syrian women in Germany) (SFD) and *Let’s Stand Again* (LSA), to process their past, improve their present and imagine a better future.

While these groups endorse a diverse range of feminist beliefs, I found it intriguing that they avoid using the label “feminist,” likely to maintain the apolitical, self-help appearance of these communities (Zucker 2004). Still, I found these digital communities to offer a more grassroots, genuine understanding of the real experiences of women from Global South countries such as Syria who moved to Global North countries such as Germany and the United States. In this article, I apply Lauren Berlant’s concept of *juxtapolitical publics* to understand how Syrian diasporic women use digital media to navigate survival and community in contexts of displacement—without necessarily engaging in formal or overtly recognized political activism. In doing so, I focus on the experiences of the leaders of two Facebook communities—SFD and LSA—by examining the mechanisms and motivations behind their creation, as well as the inner workings of the admins team to manage these pages.

Theoretical Context

In the context of Western societies, scholarship on women, self-help, and media, emphasized the neoliberal, individualistic nature of self-help messages aimed at women and described them as part of a postfeminist neoliberal ideology (Barker Gill & Harvey 2018; McRobbie 2008). The depoliticization of self-help discourses is seen as one way of how neoliberalism operates culturally by normalizing values such as self-sufficiency and personal branding while obscuring structural inequities and intersectional oppressions (Wilson 2018; Ouellette Hay 2007). In this ideological environment, scholars such as Brown (2015), sees self-help industry as a cultural technology that translates neoliberal values into the intimate

language of individual empowerment while disciplining individuals into accepting the unfair market's terms. Classic self-help books such as *The Secret*, *Atomic Habits*, and *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* reframe structural social problems (like unemployment, precarity, alienation) as personal ones not as a symptom of deeper social malaise.

In such neoliberal contexts where both the state and market systems are failing ordinary people, Berlant (2011) uses the concept of *juxtapolitical publics* to describe groups of people who are proximate to politics but not directly engaged in traditional political activities. Instead, they operate in adjacent cultural and affective spaces, where they respond to political conditions indirectly by negotiating survival, belonging, and collective life. This understanding of *juxtapolitical publics* is central to Berlant's theorization of hope, in the current times, as *cruel optimism*. In this framework, hope is a double-edged force: people cling to it amid the erosion of public institutions and civic life in the United States—not because they are naive, but because, even when recognized as “cruel,” hope provides structure and meaning to everyday life during uncertain times. Without outright dismissing hope, Berlant critiques *juxtapolitical publics* for enabling people to endure unjust conditions rather than mobilizing to challenge or transform them through direct political activism. While Berlant's concept of *juxtapolitical publics* was developed in the context of American society, I explore, in this paper, how it can be applied to understand the experiences of women from the margin, such as Syrian refugee women who use digital spaces and technologies to form *juxtapolitical publics* as a way to process their past, improve their present and imagine a better future beyond patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial structures.

Methodology and Methods

I draw on Standpoint theory as a feminist epistemological framework for this article by centering the lived experiences of those on the margins (Harding, 1991; Collins, 2000). Standpoint theory serves as a theoretical tool not only to foreground marginalized perspectives but also to reveal the structural limits of dominant ways of knowing. Standpoint theorists do not romanticize oppression or marginalization; rather, they expose

the ways canonical epistemologies have privileged elite, Western, masculine voices under the guise of universality (Lugones, 2003). Additionally, they demonstrate how subjugated standpoints render visible the blind spots and naturalized assumptions that structure hegemonic knowledge formations (Harding, 1991). In this vein, intersectional feminist scholars, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), theorize power from the margins, producing complex, situated, and historically grounded forms of knowledge.

Utilizing Standpoint theory, I focus on the lived experiences and histories of Syrian women as sources of theory and critique. This methodological orientation informed the questions I asked, which centered around the experiences and stories of Syrian women leaders of digital communities—aiming to foster a community of support and to produce knowledge grounded in their lived, embodied realities.

I conducted in-depth interviews, with the two leaders of SFD and LSA, as part of a broader study between 2018 and 2021 that focuses on small-scale media initiatives post the 2011-Syrian uprising-turned-war (Alhayek, 2025).

Standpoint theory emphasizes situated knowledge and how researchers' positionality affect research outcomes. Without my insider membership in the Syrian diasporic women community, this research would not have been possible. Analysis of the stories I share about SFD and LSA reveals insights into the broader social structures, inequalities, and resistance that Syrian displaced women experienced.

Results

Syrian diasporic women created both SFD and LSA in 2016 in response to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016¹ and the increasing influx of refugees to Germany, the United States and other western countries. The women used the privacy settings for Facebook groups to create a private group where only members can see who else is in the group and what they post. To protect the privacy of group members, Facebook does

¹ According to Nordland (2015), in modern history the year 2015 witnessed the biggest influx of migrants to Europe from outside the continent. However, as Trilling (2018) explains, the name “European migrant crisis” is problematic because it obscures the underlying causes of the refugee crisis that existed long before 2015 and continued long after it.



Syrische Frauen in Deutschland

Private group • 21.4K members

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About This Group

أهلاً وسهلاً فيكم معنا في مجموعة سيدات سوريات في ألمانيا هي المجموعة للتعارف على بعضنا بالمانيا ..
وللتأيدة بأي معلومة مهمة .. أو السؤال عن شي م...

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Only members can see who's in the group and what they post.
-  **Visible**
Anyone can find this group.
-  **Germany**
-  **General Group**
-  **History**
Group created on June 9, 2016 **See More**

**Syrische Frauen in
Deutschland (SFD)**

moving to Germany, she recognized the need for newcomers like herself to learn the host country's language and continue their education. At the same time, Shammaa and her female friends were part of an open, mixed-gender online group for refugees in Germany, which did not provide a safe space to find and discuss, in their native language Arabic, the information they needed to build their new lives.

The lack of positive, supporting online space for refugee women to exchange much-needed information and expertise in Arabic motivated Shammaa and a group of 15 young women to create SFD as a private Facebook group. In her interview with me, Shammaa clarified her goal from co-creating the page: "I felt that a lot of women are like me, they don't have a safe space to talk about the issues they want, thus I tried to create such a space and see if it will be successful" (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Over the first six months, the group dramatically expanded from 15 members to thousands of members. Membership in SFD is not allowed for anonymous accounts, and the administrators only approve requests to join the group from people who use accounts that seem real and authentic. If members violate the page's rules, the administrators engage in private online chat conversation with them to either abide by the page rules going forward, or otherwise, they revoke their membership if violations were repeated.

To encourage the members to stay in the group and develop affects of connections and usefulness, the admins started to generate hashtags around themes like “_يف يتشي ع#م” “_قمو ا#” “_تس ارد#” “_اين ا# my life in Germany,” “Study #” “_مدرسة motherhood & childhood,” and “_صحة health.” Each admin chose a hashtag to construct as an archive and expand by adding under a single stream all the relevant information and links so the page’s members can easily find and add to the stream by clicking on the hashtag.

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clarified the reasoning behind that decision:

We wanted to build a feeling that we have things in common other than the things that divide us as supporters or opponents [of the Syrian government] or as religious or atheist individuals; here in Germany we are all equals, we are all in need of learning the language and finding jobs to integrate into society (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

This editorial decision proved to be successful in the long term, but at the outset of the page in 2016 it was a very challenging situation (Zeno, 2021). The year 2016 was a turning point in the Syrian conflict because it witnessed the end of the “Battle of Aleppo,” a four-year major military confrontation between the Syrian government and different armed opposition groups in addition to the Kurdish-majority forces People's Protection Units (YPG). The admins of SFD put significant amount of time and effort to maintain peace at the page. As Shammaa describes the Syrian online tension in 2016:

We were very strict [about the rule of no political discussions] even when Aleppo was at its worst situation and people were very emotionally charged and wanting to post on the group about their feelings. Both parties [supporters and opponents of the Syrian government] called us traitors” (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

The administrators put a lot of time and emotional energy into attracting diverse Syrian women from across the political spectrum to join and stay in the SFD group. Shammaa recalls that time: “2016 was very difficult, you cannot imagine! I didn't sleep for some days because I felt an argument or a problem might erupt in the page and I didn't want any tension to happen among the members” (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

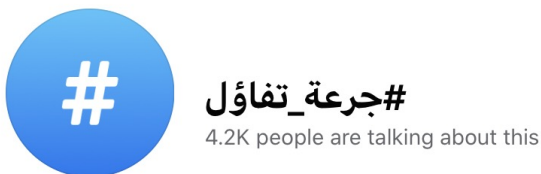


Fig. 3.2 – Hashtag “#لوافت_دعرج” A dose of optimism.” Source: SFD, September 3, 2020.

The year 2016 was also very challenging for refugees in Germany; they were mostly newcomers under huge mental and emotional stress to adapt to their new life in that country and at the same time to cope with separation from their families in Syria and the news of suffering and death there. The administrators aimed for the page to be a space of hope and encouragement. Thus, according to Shammaa, the most successful themes on the page were the posts she managed containing inspiring stories related to positive thinking and empowerment under hashtag “#تاعونم Varieties” and hashtag “#لوافت_دعرج A dose of optimism.” In this type of hashtag, women tell of what they have achieved in Germany. For example, they organized an online event within the group on January 6, 2017 to share what the women accomplished in 2016 and what they wish to achieve in 2017, hence the hashtags “Our beautiful achievements #انجازاتنا, Our sweetest dreams #لمحالمنا.”

At the end of 2016, the administrators felt the success of their approach to managing the page. Shammaa noted that “As admins we started to feel happy when we see, for example, a woman whose profile picture has the Syrian government flag and a woman whose profile picture has the opposition flag, interacting and exchanging information impartially” (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Women in the group don't discuss possibilities to return to Syria, but instead are focused on building their new lives in Germany. Shammaa claims that “women were able to integrate and succeed faster than men,” and explains that some women who are new mothers used their maternity leave to focus on learning the German language and enrolling in education or professional programs.

Using communication technologies to create a women-only online space is empowering for displaced women so they can discuss and share intimate details about their mental and personal lives. Shammaa clarifies: “we wanted women to not feel embarrassed to discuss their mental health because there are men in the group.” She adds

² Maternity leave in Germany is very generous and can be extended in some circumstances to three years <https://germanculture.com.ua/daily/maternity-leave-law-in-germany/>

We wanted as much as we could to create a space where women can talk about anything, including their problems with their husbands. Some women shared their experiences with domestic violence.. We had members who are activists in the field of violence against women and they supported the other members who identified as victims.” (S. Shammaa, personal communication, June 9, 2019).

Also, having a women-only online space alleviates possible negative gender dynamics, like men who want to intervene in how the page is managed and control the direction of topics and discussions.

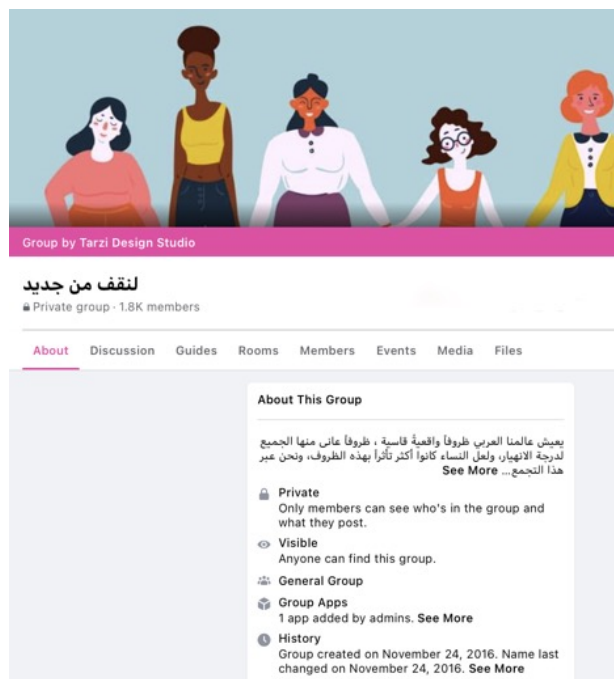


Fig. 3.3 – A screenshot of Let's Stand Again's "about" section without any personally identifiable information (February 10, 2021).

Let's Stand Again (LSA)

Let's Stand Again is a private Facebook group that was created on November 24, 2016 by a Syrian immigrant woman in the United States. It is a women-only online space. Currently, the group has over 1,800 members and 7 admins. I interviewed the founder of the group Nour Tarzi (35 years old) twice: the first time through in person interview in Long Beach, California on August 8, 2018; and the second time through an online interview on September 28, 2020.

Tarzi came to the United States with her parents as an immigrant in 2002. For over 10 years, she suffered from lack of integration

into the American society. Thus while studying graphic design in the US, she co-founded "Shabablik Forum," an online forum with more than 10,000 members that focuses on Syrian culture, music, history, daily life, and heritage.

With the inception of war in Syria, Tarzi stopped her media activism for a few years. However, in 2016 with the influx of refugees to the United States and other western countries, she observed that many young women who are newcomers are going through the integration problems that she faced when she first arrived in the US. Tarzi wanted to create an online space only for Syrian and Arab women because she felt that "women suffer more than men. Men have more social experiences and courage and openness to the other. Many women come [to the US] with no desire to study or work or to learn the [English] language" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, August 8, 2018). Tarzi's observation can be explained by the traditional gender roles in her conservative community that provide men with skills in public space to adapt into new social settings faster than women whose skills are more limited to the domestic, private space. Tarzi describes her greatest achievement, saying "to encourage women to be more open, to explore, to dare, to study and to work" (N. Tarzi, personal communication, August 8, 2018).

The first main activity in the group was that Tarzi started to produce learning videos about each chapter of her favorite book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. The book was first published in 1989 and is considered a classic neoliberal self-help book written by Stephen Covey.³ Unhappy with the existing Arabic translations, Tarzi's videos are based on her own translations and understanding of the book. In a couple of days, the number of members increased from 10 to 400 members. LSA's founder and members started to post invitations to join the group on larger diasporic women-only Facebook groups. Tarzi, who comes from a conservative Muslim family in Syria, was expecting a strong repudiation of her online videos and appearances from her extended family. But to her surprise, relatives and friends around the world were very supportive praising her efforts and demanding more encouraging, empowering content: "I was surprised with the interactive responses, many

³ Stephen Covey was an American educator and businessman who lived between 1932 and 2012.

women were telling me ‘please do more, we want someone to encourage us’” (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

While Tarzi arrived into the US a year after September 11, a time with significant hostility against Muslims and Arabs, she notes that the situation under Trump’s rule is more challenging: “I have been in the US for almost 18 years, I never experienced the level of racism that I saw in Trump era” (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020). She adds: “I felt a huge difference in how people treat me and other Muslims and Arabs, people became very rude, and racism has become extraordinary” (N. Tarzi, personal communication, September 28, 2020).

Between 2016 and 2020, Tarzi produced and broadcasted over 100 live and recorded videos on the page that focuses on empowering messages. Her videos tackle issues that reflect experiences specific to the US context like racism in Trump era, classism within the Syrian immigrant and displaced communities in Southern California (where she’s based), and interaction with injured victims of the Syrian war who are brought to the US for medical treatments. However, the larger themes of the videos and online discussions on the group are around themes of self-help like the positive impacts of technology; self-care and reproductive health; overcoming depression; fighting racism; combating bullying behaviors; dealing with divorce; and surviving domestic violence. In 2020, Tarzi launched a program on the page titled “For you and others” *لـكـري غـلو لـكـل* where members suggest a topic to discuss on each episode and Tarzi will host a member who is an expert on the topic. Some of the themes discussed in the episodes include postpartum depression, infertility and pregnancy loss, the educational role of social media, and COVID-19.



Fig. 3.4 – A screenshot of opening title of the program “For you and others” *لـكـري غـلو لـكـل*. Source: LSA, (December 26, 2020).

Discussion

In contrast to Western scholarship on women, self-help, and media—which often emphasizes the neoliberal, individualistic nature of self-help messages aimed at women—I have shown in this paper how women from the margins form juxtapolitical publics centered on community care and collective future-making through shared, self-help-inspired digital discourse and practice.

Syrian diasporic women use digital media to navigate survival and community in contexts of displacement—without necessarily engaging in formal or overtly recognized political activism. However, their efforts to create community and network of knowledge, care and support contribute to challenging some of the existing power structures in their lives and to imagining a better future—efforts that can be considered political acts because they expose broader systems of domination in the women’s lives. For example, both SFD and LSA groups were formed in 2016 in response to deeply political conditions in their home country, Syria—where the war was at its peak—and in their host countries, such as Germany and the United States, where refugees and immigration were central to political discourse and electoral debates.

While the leaders of the two Facebook communities—SFD and LSA—hold certain privileges in terms of education and access to technology, the stories they share about their motivations for founding these digital spaces reveal forms of resistance to intersectional oppressions. On one level, they were navigating racism and growing hostility in their host countries due to intersecting factors such as national origin, religion, economic conditions, and limited language skills. On another level, within their own diasporic communities, they were resisting traditional gender roles, limited experience in public space, and the dominance of men in mixed-gender online forums. Thus, forming digital communities such as SFD and LSA around themes of affect, survival, and everyday knowledge enabled connections among women from diverse educational backgrounds and professions, shifting power dynamics in their lives in empowering ways. These communities provide women not only with a means of imagining collective futures beyond the constraints of the difficult present but also with the tools and connections to actively pursue them. However, a persistent challenge for these digital communities is that they continue to operate under

the constraints of corporate governance, where companies like Facebook monitor, store, and monetize user data. Moreover, such social media conglomerates often collaborate with oppressive states to unilaterally shut down pages or hand over user data, thereby facilitating the surveillance of marginalized communities and limiting the margins in which they work toward a better collective future.

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The author report there are no competing interests to declare.

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