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Culinary sustainability as a resilience practice for Syrian refugees amidst urban precarity in Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

In a context of urban precarity and food insecurity, our research examines how Syrian women in Istanbul (Turkey) (re-)create "Syrian cultural foods" as part of fulfilling gendered expectations for homemaking. Fleeing civil war since 2011, Syrians find safety in Turkey, but they struggle with a financially and politically insecure temporary protection status making the daily act of cooking a significant challenge. In contrast to research focused on sustainability primarily in terms of health and nutrition, we show the important role that culture plays in determining what food is considered sustaining. Specifically, we identify "culinary sustainability" strategies which are culturally embedded food practices that foster resilience for migrants in a new setting. Based on semi-structured interviews and participant observations in the kitchens of Syrian women in Istanbul, we identify three strategies: 1) Homemade food practices, 2) Adjustment, and 3) Recycling. Addressing a burgeoning literature that tries to integrate sustainability and resilience studies, we show how each strategy corresponds to a feature of cultural resilience (engaging forms of resistance, adaptation and innovation). Under severe socio-economic constraints, Syrian women use creative adaptations to innovate tasty new ways of showing culinary care in a new country and an unfamiliar megacity, Istanbul.

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Introduction

"Since one lacks power and strength as a refugee, you want to show off your smartness with everything you do. You do not want to let anyone talk badly about you. I mean, I have no power, but I want to be strong, so I learned how to cook." This is how Bana, a 61-year-old Damascene artist who came to Turkey as a refugee in 2015, explains the ways food preparation builds her confidence. Bana is among the 1,5 million Syrian refugee women in Turkey who are living under "temporary protection" status after having fled the war in Syria, which has been ongoing since 2011.[1] Her remarks are exemplary of the ways Syrian women turn the emotional, financial, and cultural tasks of cooking into acts of resilience. For migrants like Bana, food is more than mere sustenance. It symbolizes home and nurtures belonging in families and communities (Matta, de Suremain, and Crenn 2020). Syrian women face

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increased pressures to feed their families with affordable, nutritious, enjoyable and culturally satisfying food after forced migration. They are often isolated from extended kin ties and social networks where cooking was a shared activity (Bellotti 2023; Indra 1994). The urban context of Istanbul creates new opportunities for ready-made food and restaurant consumption, while at the same time creating challenges in the form of limited access to traditional ingredients (Yılmaz-Hava 2023). Additionally, migrants struggle with food precarity in an increasingly unstable economy with high inflation and limited budgets. In this article, we draw on ethnographic research with Syrian women in their homes to explore how they confront these challenges via a set of "culinary sustainability" strategies.

We define "culinary sustainability" as culturally embedded food practices that foster resilience, which is particularly important for migrants in a new setting. For Syrian women in Turkey, we identify three culinary sustainability strategies: "homemade food practices;" "adjustment;" and "recycling." Homemade food practices involve making from scratch foods that would have formerly been purchased in stores in Syria like bread or falafel. Adjustment means incorporating flexibility into traditional ingredients (such as substituting chicken for lamb or beef) to recreate familiar flavors within a limited budget. Recycling is the practice of reusing items for storing or preparing food that would normally be considered trash and repurposing leftovers into new dishes. Each strategy corresponds to a component of resilience (Bouchard 2013) when understood in its cultural context (Ungar 2008): resistance, adaptation, and innovation. We show that the kitchen is sometimes a field of resistance to sustain culture and identity by sticking to one's culinary heritage, by cooking traditional sweets that are not available in stores, for example. Kitchens are sometimes fields of adaptation for cooking and eating in a different cultural setting, such as via new storing practices that fit the new climate better. Sometimes the kitchen is a field of reinvention as women innovate new culinary styles or practices to save money and combat food insecurity. In all cases, kitchens are a place where women show their strength, love for their families and a fair bit of creativity while sustaining their cultural practices (Adapon 2008).

In contrast to research on sustainability that focuses primarily on food as a source of health and nutrition without a focus on culture (cf. Béné et al. 2019; Mansour et al. 2020), we show how sustainability is a resilient practice of maintaining cultural foods while incorporating new ingredients and methods in a new environment. Research shows that "culinary traditions," which are the food practices and habits that people see as essential to their heritage and identity, are important for migrant well-being as they help to facilitate belonging in the new society (Parasecoli 2014; Rottmann and Kanal 2023). These traditions are not timeless windows onto the past, but are rather social constructions of identity developed in response to immediate conditions (Ang 2011).

In many cultures, including Syrian culture, women are largely responsible for cultural reproduction across generations via the foods they cook. However, migrant women are also exposed to new consumer and social contexts and thus may also be engaged with creatively incorporating different foods into their cooking repertoires and through developing new "culinary competences" (Parasecoli 2014). At the same time migrants often confront racism and find themselves relegated to lower classes. Thus, an intersectional approach that focuses on how gender, culture, social class and migrant status intersect and impact food practices is needed (Anthias 2002; Davis 2014; Mescoli 2020).

This article explores how Syrian women's culinary strategies are forged out of intersections of migrant status, gender and socio-economic positioning.

We address research pointing to the importance of culture for the study of resilience (Panter-Brick 2015; Ungar 2008) and in particular we highlight creative cooking as a powerful micro-level resilience practice for women. Finally, we argue that sustainability and resilience are compatible when viewed in their cultural context (Lew et al. 2016; Magis 2010; Sakdapolrak et al. 2024; Triandafyllidou and Yeoh 2023) – they are both important dimensions of refugee experience and practice as they navigate their new cultural and culinary homes.

The next section outlines the research fields of sustainability and resilience with a particular focus on migration, gender and food research. Next, we describe the precarious urban context of Syrian women in Istanbul and the methodology we used to study their culinary practices. The following sections explore the three culinary sustainability strategies we identified -"homemade food practices;" "adjustment;" and "recycling." These sections demonstrate the importance of a cultural and intersectional approach to sustainability and resilience, the need for attention to creativity and the complementarity of sustaining and bouncing back. Finally, the paper suggests directions for further research on migrant food practices and particularly on culinary sustainability and gender.

Sustainability, resilience, and food practices

Sustainability can be described as the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainability research across the world is mainly shaped by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted by the United Nations in 2015, which sets out sustainable development goals (SDGs) to create a harmonious, and resilient system that can endure over the long term while addressing environmental, social, and economic concerns. Among 17 complementary SDGs, some goals stand out with particular relevance for our research, such as ending hunger by fighting against food precarity and increasing agricultural productivity; reducing poverty and inequalities; creating sustainable cities and communities; and enabling responsible consumption and production.

Sustainable food systems aim to minimize or prevent food (in)security or food precarity (Eakin et al. 2016). The World Food Summit 1996 (World Health Organization 2012) defined food security as "when all people at all times have sustainable physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food, to meet their dietary needs and food preferences, for a healthy and productive life." Being food insecure occurs when people face an absence of "economic and physical access to enough nutritionally adequate, safe and culturally relevant food by all people for an active healthy life" (Gallegos et.al. 2007). Among populations who face food insecurity, forced migrants and refugees are placed near the top (Ghattas et al. 2015; Hadley, Patil, and Nahayo 2010; Moffat, Mohammed, and Newbold 2017).[2] Also referred to as "food precarity" in some research with reference to a systems-based approach,[3] food (in)security literature on migrants tends to focus on the malnutrition of refugees due to their being a precarious, vulnerable, and disadvantaged group (Sellen et al. 2001), with a lack of access to food stemming from political, environmental, and economic factors. The ties between food

and culture are often not examined in these works. Cultural and social factors such as language barriers or culturally different food preferences/environments add to hardships making it more difficult for migrants to adapt to their new lives (Béné et al. 2019; Mansour et al. 2020; Moffat, Mohammed, and Newbold 2017). Thus, it is important to understand the role of culture within sustainable food practices. Further, culture operates in combination with migratory status, socio-economic situation and gender, thus it is important to adopt an approach (Anthias 2002; Davis 2014) that is sensitive to the way food becomes an "intersectional locating medium" (Mescoli 2020, 56).

Creating a more sustainable environment for refugees also goes hand in hand with increasing their resilience. There is a growing acknowledgment in migration studies of the limitations in applying the United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) three "durable solutions" that aim to end the "refugee cycle," which are: voluntary repatriation, resettlement to a safe third country, and local integration (Souter 2014; Zetter and Long 2012). In the case of Syrian refugees, the on-going war means that the possibility of voluntary return is unlikely in the near future. Resettlement rates to a third country (64,824 people in total over 12 years[4]) remain very low compared to the total Syrian population in the country (3,174.851).[5] There is now a growing interest in developing frameworks to enhance refugees' "self-reliance" and "resilience" (Krause and Schmidt 2019).

The resilience of migrants is often evaluated from a psychological perspective as "the positive internal strengths and qualities of individuals in adverse situations" (Zhao et al. 2023). This approach, however, runs the risk of over-shadowing the complexity of displaced people's lives and the governance responsibilities of states by putting pressure on refugees' self-organization; hence, attention is shifted away from the perpetrators of oppressive systems to the victims (Pugh 2021). Recent work points to the importance of looking at resilience as "culturally and contextually embedded" (Ungar 2008; see also Panter-Brick 2015; Vindevogel et al. 2015). In other words, the concept also has sociological and cultural meanings that "denotes the capacity of a society to cope with a challenge" by resisting, adapting, or re-inventing (Bouchard 2013). According to this threefold perspective, resilience can be understood firstly as resisting external pressure by maintaining continuity with the past, as we see in the idea of sticking to one's roots to maintain self-esteem (Castles and Miller 2008). "Collective imaginaries" and myths can be a source of resistance and resilience here (Bouchard 2013). Secondly, resilience can be in the form of adapting, which is also very much linked to acculturation and sociocultural integration. However, resilience can also go beyond these first two strategies embracing creativity to find solutions to new difficulties. Along these lines, refugees' creative self-expression can be understood as a form of resilience (Aleong 2022). This creative capacity is at times expressed through art, as we see in the case of undocumented migrants in Belgium (Damery and Mescoli 2019). Such art projects can be considered "transgressive cosmopolitanism" activities in which nonhierarchical and pluralist cultural encounters that go beyond existing boundaries can be expressed (Herron 2018; Rygiel and Baban 2019).

Like art, food can be another field of creative resilience (Adapon 2008). Examples, like Über den Tellerrand (Kitchen Hub) in Berlin or Sharehaus Refugio and Cafe in Berlin, create interaction areas through kitchens so that resilience is not only about increasing the self-reliance of individual refugees, but also a way of fostering social cohesion and

strengthening whole communities (Starck and Matta 2022). The transformative impact of food-based integration projects is also manifest in inventive Turkish initiatives that transgress cultural and political boundaries, such as the "Mutbakh Workshop" by the Kırkayak Culture Association (Uçar et al. 2020); the "Marifet Mutfağı" project,[6] the "Kitchens Without Border" workshop by the International Migrant Women's Solidarity Association, and culinary workshops of the Küçükçekmece Municipality in partnership with EKİP (Effective Women's Business Platform). Our research adds another case of creative resilience through cooking via a micro-level window onto innovative cooking in women's homes. Migrant women are not passively "getting by" in the kitchen, but resisting and creatively struggling to preserve their culinary heritage while adapting to new tastes and contingent situations.

With regard to the link between sustainability and resilience, two contrasting perspectives are prominent. Some research argues that the two concepts refer to completely different ontological paradigms; whereas sustainability is linked to preserving resources and a state of stability, resilience has to do with the ability to adapt to a state of change and even chaos (Anderies et al. 2013; Kochskämper et al. 2024; Romero-Lankao et al. 2016). While sustainability stresses "aspirational goals associated with the careful use of resources and ensuring provision for future generations," resilience is "pragmatic and inclusive of a range of responses that may or may not align with sustainability principles" (Espiner, Orchiston, and Higham 2017, 11). Other research finds that these two concepts share common ground whereby "resilience is an indicator of sustainability" (Lew et al. 2016; see also Magis 2010).

In the field of migration studies, both perspectives are present. For example, research has found that the EU promotes resilience in the face of migration pressures in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, but at the expense of long-term and thus sustainable migration governance solutions (Özçürümez 2021). Flexible policies that increase the resilience of a system may ultimately threaten the sustainability of that system as in the case of migrants to the Gulf during the pandemic (Ewers et al. 2023). On the other hand, resilience may be seen as a significant factor for generating sustainable migration governance solutions as, for example, when governments responded to the pandemic by implementing more durable solutions in the field of healthcare (Triandafyllidou and Yeoh 2023). Other research looks at migration as an adaptive response to changes on the part of individuals that requires spatial and socially attuned approaches (Sakdapolrak et al. 2024). This work suggests, "Migration and the resulting translocal livelihood situations have the potential to alleviate pressure from local resource use . . . to increase awareness for and the dissemination of sustainable practices, and thus to increase sustainability" (Sakdapolrak et al. 2024, 8). In this paper, we adopt a micro-level approach to argue that sustainability and resilience are complementary projects for Syrian women in Turkey. We show that sustainability can happen both at home and also in host countries as resilience practices help (to partially) sustain cultural food making in the host country.

Studying precarious urban refugee women in Istanbul

The "bare life" and precarious conditions in refugee camps are often at the forefront of discussions of lack of access to services or human rights violations for refugees (Agamben

1998; Hanafi and Long 2010). Thus, hosting refugees in urban settings ("urban refugees") is now seen as a more humane, natural and durable solution to camps (UNHCR 2020). While precarity in refugee camps can be severe, urban settings can also harbor severe precarity with vastly unequal hierarchical social formations. Refugees are often on the bottom-most socio-economic layers of societies as they navigate their way through the city by means of their own social and financial capital. Istanbul, the field site of this research is no exception. It is a megacity and the largest urban center hosting the highest Syrian refugee population in Turkey. Currently, there are 3.167,421 Syrians under "temporary protection" in Turkey, 530.397 of them living in Istanbul (Turkish Presidency of Migration Management 2024). Syrian refugees experience precarity in terms of the labor market, housing, healthcare, and education sectors, and also face increasing discrimination in everyday life, which triggers a legitimate fear of expressing their culture and identity socially (Eder and Özkul 2016). In addition to "precarity of status, precarity of space and precarity of movement" (Ilcan, Rygiel, and Baban 2018; Oner, Durmaz-Drinkwater, and Grant 2020), Syrian refugees in Turkey also experience food precarity, which is addressed by, local municipalities, NGOs and social networks, but this is not always sufficient. Additionally, the municipal districts with the lowest development level host the highest number of refugees (Erdoğan, Şener, and Ağca 2021). Most Istanbul municipalities (about 75%) do not provide any cash aid to refugees due to "limitations in legislation, lack of budget, and lack of demand from immigrants and refugees in the district borders" (Erdoğan, Şener, and Ağca 2021, 145). The high number of undocumented laborers and precarious working conditions (Çetin 2016; TİSK 2020; TESEV 2015) also deepen the insecurities and hardships faced by Syrian refugees.

Intersecting with economic challenges, urban lifestyles and conditions also have a significant impact on food practices and spur a reorganization of gender roles (Parasecoli 2014, 433). First, women take on the responsibility of managing tasks out of the home, such as doing grocery shopping and taking the kids to school after migrating to Istanbul. Our interviewees underlined that women often did not go shopping at bazaars or supermarkets in Syria. Rather, it was their husband's duty to bring home whatever was needed, and this shopping was generally done in bulk and would be enough for a whole season or a year. In Turkey, husbands are generally working longer hours than they did in Syria, and they are away from the house most of the day, which leads to women's autonomy in managing the household budget and food affairs, including decisions related to grocery shopping and meal preparation for their wives. The exposure to a wide array of consumption opportunities in Istanbul is combined with the emotional and financial challenge of being responsible for obtaining and making food. Despite increased food availability that one finds in urban supermarkets, the psychological impacts of urban life and food precarity trigger more stress, insecurity, and anxiety among Syrian refugees.

This research draws on findings from an on-going project studying food practices among Syrian refugees in Turkey funded by the Turkish National Science Foundation (Tubitak). The project relies on ethnographic fieldwork in homes, including 50 hours of participant observation, 20 life history interviews and 10 mental maps on Istanbul. Its goal is to theorize how belonging is expressed through intra- and inter-community food-related cultural and social practices and to intervene in integration debates in the public sphere. In this

framework, we discovered that belonging and home-making can be understood in terms of specific sustainable and resilient food practices. The research was conducted by native Arabic speaking Syrian (Author 2), Turkish (Author 1) and American (Author 3) researchers, as part of a larger team including Lebanese, Iraqi and Turkish members. All interviewees were Sunni Muslims and Syrian nationals aged above 18.

There is variation in our sample with regard to the socio-economic background of migrants, but a majority were economically and socially precarious, and thus face an intersection of inequalities based on gender, class and migrant status. Many interviewees were housewives in low-income households, while some were working part-time in underpaid and uninsured jobs. Our participants were also politically insecure given their legal status (temporary protection), which can be revoked at any time and limits movement between cities. The objective in selecting participants was to obtain a diverse sample with regard to location within Istanbul. Those we interviewed were preexisting contacts of the researchers or were recruited via snowball sampling. Interview questions covered a range of topics related to the interviewees' migration experiences, focusing on their past and present relationship with food and cooking. We examined our participants' perceptions of Turkish and Syrian cuisines, shopping practices, budget-related cooking decisions, food sharing practices, and transformations after migration.

In addition to semi-structured interviews, we conducted six-months of participant observation between January-June 2023 during which time we visited Syrian women's homes in districts of Istanbul such as Fatih, Küçükçekmece, and Başakşehir, which have high populations of Syrians. We also visited women-led cooperatives where Syrian and Turkish women cook and sell food and observed food preparation and interactions between Turks and Syrians. Participant observation of shopping and cooking in homes allowed the researchers to observe interactions occurring between migrants and locals and activities such as greeting, hosting, shared meals and more. Each researcher took detailed field notes of participant observations, usually immediately after visits.

The project applies a constructivist Grounded Theory Approach (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967), meaning that the research structure is flexible and the researchers actively explore concepts that emerge from the field. During analysis, themes that appeared in a majority of interviews related to sustainability and resilience were identified and then grouped together. The conceptualization and measurement of "culinary sustainability" was developed during this process; and was further shaped in response to categories elaborated by active discussions with research participants.

Culinary sustainability strategies

The next sections look at the three culinary sustainability strategies that emerged during our fieldwork: Homemade food practices, adjustment, and recycling. In addition, we explain how each strategy incorporates important dimensions of resilience (resistance, adaptation and innovation). The strategies we outline below are in fact inter-related to one another, and thus the food practices we use to exemplify a strategy (i.e., making a hamburger at home exemplifying adaptation) are often interchangeable with another strategy (hamburger making can also be seen as resistance and innovation). Our categorizations of culinary practices is not essentialist, but aims to highlight specific notable

aspects in order to explore the three dimensions of culinary sustainability and resilience perspectives.

The resistance of homemade food practices

By homemade food practices, we refer to prioritizing the preparation of home-made foods rather than going to restaurants or buying from shops. Making food at home requires an expansion of cooking skills, but it is at the same time a way through which women resist cultural loss. With homemade food practices, they sustain their "culinary traditions" (Parasecoli 2014). They also combat food precarity in the form of expensive and perceived "unhealthy temptations" of foods that are part of Istanbul city life. In so doing, they make sure that their families stay healthy and feel their loving care, while they build their own self-esteem (Castles and Miller 2008).

A major reason to make food at home is due to a lack of availability of cultural food items in nearby shops. Although Istanbul offers a wide variety of ingredients, foods and even some "Syrian markets," migrants do not have access to cultural foods that were common in Syria. In Syria, it was customary to buy some foods from restaurants, such as bread, *foul* [fava beans], and *falafel*, especially on Fridays. These traditional and popular foods were available in abundance and sold at cheap prices (2024). Falafel and Syrian-style bread are available in some neighborhoods in Istanbul, but they are not abundant. In Turkey, our interviewees expressed that they started making these traditional dishes at their homes. For example, in the context of our conversations with Dunya and Bayan on their new food practices, Dunya related, "We started making everything, every type of food, even sweets and pastries. There are not many Syrian bakeries here, except in Fatih and Aksaray." Bayan informed us, "The sweets that we used to buy ready-made in Syria, we now make at home because they do not exist here in Turkey." Even though migrants are confronted with a greater variety of foods and consumption choices in Istanbul, they have less access to cultural foods.

Difficulty accessing Syrian ingredients shops was felt especially strongly during women's first years in Istanbul, when they did not know their way around. Yet, even after they discovered the locations of Syrian markets, being displaced in a megacity like Istanbul carries challenges like the need to travel long distances and high transport costs. Almost all of the Syrian women we met told us that they could not find Syrian markets and restaurants nearby and in particular, they could not access Syrian pastries or bread, which is an everyday food in Syrian culture. In light of these challenges, women told us that they have started to make traditional and non-traditional dishes and recipes in their houses. Bayan gave the following example: "The sweets that we used to buy ready-made in Syria like *halawet al-jebn* [sweet cheese rolls], we now make at home because they do not exist here." Some women make a direct connection between cooking at home and greater skills. For example, with a huge smile on her face, Amal related: "I wasn't making pastries in Syria; now I'm doing them all by myself. Look!" Dunya, Bayan and Amal are resisting the challenges of urban life in exile by learning new skills so that they can recreate their cultural foods, and show resilience against the risk of losing their culinary heritage after migration.

A final facet of home food-making is storing food at home (*Mouneh*) to maintain familiar tastes and "culinary traditions" (Parasecoli 2014) while also reducing the need to

Figure 1. *Mouneh: Olives, makdous* [pickled stuffed eggplants] and thyme prepared and stored for later consumption (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

buy more or eat out. *Mouneh* is the traditional practice of storing seasonal food in the MENA region, and it is the main source of household nutrition, especially in food-insecure households (Nicholson 2019). It is an essential aspect of the food experience for Syrian refugees (Al-Sayed and Bieling 2022; Kikano, Fauveaud, and Lizarralde 2021). The production of *Mouneh* food includes different forms and techniques like freezing, drying, and storing raw materials. It also includes making dairy foods, jams, pickles, and olives (see Figure 1).

Many women explained that it is more cost-effective to make *Mouneh* than it is to purchase smaller quantities of food from the markets. However, women from lower social classes also told us that it is very difficult to maintain the traditional *Mouneh* habit in Istanbul for many reasons, including smaller household spaces for storing food, budget constraints that limit buying large quantities of food, limited access to household items like refrigerators, and the high humidity in Istanbul. The following narrative illustrates these difficulties:

> My mother used to make a lot of Mouneh by hand . . . in different shapes and colours. . .. Olives, makdous, kishk [a mixture of fermented milk and wheat], tomato sauce. It was impossible to buy ready-made food from outside our house. She always did everything with her own hands, but now it's all from outside. (Razan)

Despite difficulties, most of the women we met persevere.

> The kitchen in Aleppo was bigger. Here, in general, they do not have storage places, because there is humid weather [. . .] so it is difficult to store anything except in the refrigerator or freezer. (Gadeer)

Notwithstanding the challenges of smaller refrigerators, freezers, balconies and containers, women like Razan and Gadeer are determined to maintain this important cultural practice, which they find both delicious and practical.

These examples capture resilience in the face of a new urban lifestyle and food precarity and also illustrate the cultural and intersectional dimensions of culinary sustainability practices. By making traditional and non-traditional foods at home, refugee women resist new conditions of food production and consumption, create feelings of familiarity and food security for their families and ensure clean and high-quality nutrition for their children. While culinary sustainability practices clearly have psychological benefits, we can only fully appreciate them by taking the cultural context into account. *Mouneh* is a cultural practice that women have seen their grandmothers performing and it is important to sustain this part of their heritage after forced migration, even under difficult conditions. Making food at home is about more than simply saving money and obtaining nutrition – they also need cultural belonging to feel food secure.

Adjustment as adaptation

Another important culinary sustainability strategy is to adjust recipes or cooking techniques, which we see as a source of adaptation within resilience practices (Bouchard 2013). By adjustment, we mean maintaining traditional food practices but changing small aspects. In our view, adjustments are both sustainable and resilient (Sakdapolrak et al. 2024). On the one hand, food adjustments facilitate traditional food preparation and continuity after migration. On the other hand, adjustment represents resilience and adaptation in terms of embracing the state of change through recipe modification. Cultural knowledge allows both maintenance of traditions and also governs how people adapt to new precarious conditions and environmental circumstances.

In the context of economic precarity that they face, Syrian women are forced to use affordable instead of expensive ingredients, which means a significant need for adaptation. This would be a common practice in Syria or elsewhere when budgets are tight, but we noticed that migrants are becoming quite creative in what they will cook in Istanbul. For example, in Syria, people would not be likely to substitute chicken for beef or lamb, although poor people would reduce the amount of beef or lamb they ate. However, we observed many Syrian women using chicken rather than beef or lamb meat in their cooking while attempting to maintain the same tastes. As Sana's narrative illustrates, chicken was rarely consumed in Syria:

I do not remember that I ate a chicken breast in Syria. [. . .] Here, for example, we grill chicken, which never occurred to us to do in Syria. I used to make *Kabsa* [a rice dish] in Aleppo with meat pieces, and now I put chicken pieces in it. A widespread recipe adaptation in Turkey is to make *kibbeh*, the traditional Syrian dish which is usually bulgur wheat and ground meat meatballs with chicken instead. This dish is commonly enjoyed at special occasions and family gatherings. In our interviews with Syrian women, many of them expressed that they substituted beef with chicken because they think that it has either no or a very limited impact on the taste (Figure 2). For example, Intisar related, "I have let many people taste it, and they did not know that it was chicken because I put fat in it." With the addition of fat, Intisar believes that she has fooled her guests into thinking they were eating meat.

Figure 2. The traditional Syrian dish, kibbeh, made with chicken inside instead of ground meat (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

Women express pride about being able to make traditional foods, despite their limited resources. This shift from beef to chicken can be seen as a part of a broader trend to deal with economic precarity. As we observed, the Syrian restaurants in Turkey offer the traditional Syrian dish *Lahm bi ajeen* (meat on dough) made out of chicken for those with limited budgets. Interestingly, we have also observed many social media cooking sites that instruct women about how to adapt to challenging economic conditions, while cooking traditional food, such as Chef Omar in Turkey (LBC International 2022) who teaches Syrian recipes online using local Turkish ingredients.

Women are also proud of their ability to overcome the humidity problem in Istanbul that would make *Mouneh* preparation, and in particular the preserving of tomatoes and peppers difficult. Traditionally, these *Mouneh* vegetables need to be sun-dried, not chopped and cooked on the stovetop. But many Syrian women started using different techniques to address the humidity problem and the small balconies they have in Istanbul. For example, Walaa explained,

> For a very long time, in my old house in Gaziantep, I used to dry peppers in the sun on the balcony, then wash them, then chop them using a kibbeh machine. This is the traditional Aleppo method, which is to dry it in the sun. Here in Istanbul, food cannot be dried due to the humidity, . . . but I cook it on the stove and boil it.

By adapting ingredients and changing techniques, women cope with their food insecurity and a new socio-ecological environment, while still sustaining their cultural practices. Another major impact of this new urban environment is exposure to more food options, including new fast-foods and Turkish foods that may be expensive or perceived as

unhealthy. In pre-war Syria, almost all international restaurant chains were banned because of US economic sanctions on the Syrian government in the context of post 9/11, with a few exceptions, such as KFC which opened in 2006 in Damascus and Aleppo, but eventually closed in 2013 due to the ongoing war (Haffez 2013). Despite the lack of international fast-food chains, there were still some local restaurants that used to sell hamburgers and other international foods. Some Syrian women used to make these fast-food dishes at home in Syria. Yet, there has been a significant expansion in this practice after migration due to increasing exposure to fast-food chains in Istanbul along with economic precarity and health concerns. A majority of women we interviewed expressed concern that younger generations, especially their children, love the ready-made food available in Istanbul stores and eating at restaurants that were not available in Syria.

The pressure to provide attractive foods symbolic of an urban or global lifestyle for their children requires women to adapt to this new setting by learning new dishes. With great enthusiasm, Dunya showed us a picture of the food she prepared in a restaurant-like way (see Figure 3) saying, "Since my children love it to look like it does in restaurants. . . I make a plate for them like this. I put pieces of roasted chicken and a small plate with mayonnaise, ketchup, tomato slices, and potatoes. I learned to do this at home because it was more expensive to buy it from restaurants." For many mothers we spoke with, restaurant food is not only a source of nutrition and health concerns, but it is also

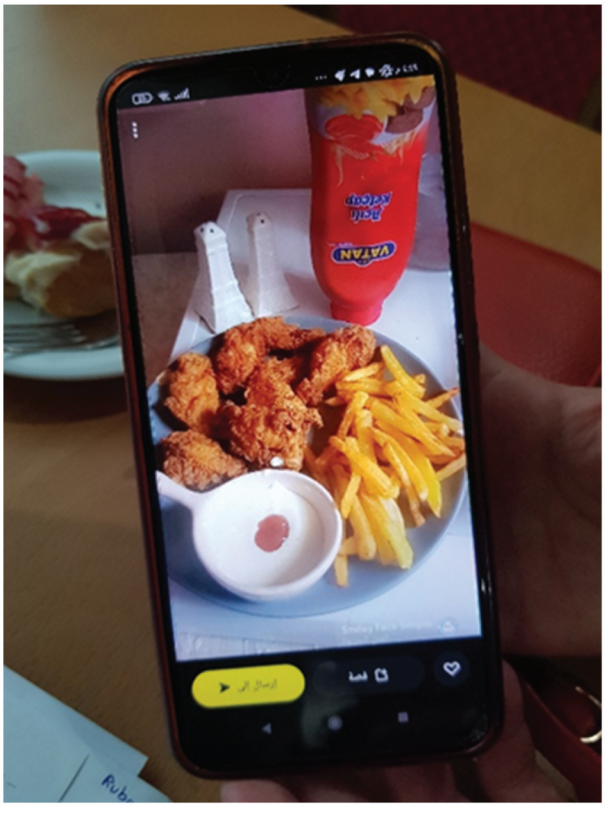

Figure 3. A fried chicken fast food meal prepared at home by Dunya (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

not affordable. Despite the added pressures and labor that this preparation of different types of food at home creates for women, they link such cooking practices to their children's well-being.

While Syrian migrant women resist culinary loss and consumerism by cooking traditional dishes as in the first strategy we explored (resistance); they also adapt to their new lifestyles by incorporating unfamiliar recipes into their kitchen. Being open to learning new skills and showing perseverance is clear indicator of resilience. As these examples show, sustainability need not only be seen as conservative. It can also involve striking inventions that support resilience and bring people in line with preexisting *and* new social systems (Lew et al. 2016). In some cases, resilience requires more than adaptation, even moving to the realm of innovating new ways of doing things.

Recycling as innovation

The final culinary sustainability strategy we observed is recycling – by which we mean re-using or repurposing household items as part of food preparation in a creative or unexpected way. With recycling, refugees contribute to a sustainable and healthy environment, although this is usually a secondary reason for their recycling. Re-using is mainly a survival strategy for them as it was before migration (in Syria and in other locations) where finances are tight. However, we observed that refugee households that have been impacted by the economic precarity of urban life take recycling much further. For example, many women reuse containers and packages to eliminate the need to purchase plastic and glass containers (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Pickled vegetables in recycled drink containers (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

Figure 5. A Syrian plastic bread bag being used in place of plastic wrap to roll out dough (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

As Ruba told us: "I keep the pickle jar when I buy it from the supermarket. I put things in it. For example, I keep the square yoghurt container." As can be seen in the following figure (Figure 5), Intisar reused a plastic Syrian bread bag to roll out dough and prepare food, creating a new tool out of a recycled item. Dunya also reused plastic milk and juice containers to store her spices (Figure 6).

During many interviews, Syrian women showed special attention to the issue of food waste and leftovers. One noteworthy aspect of reducing food waste is creative leftover usage. For example, Walaa used to add the leftover sauce of *Mahshi* [rice-stuffed vegetables cooked in tomato sauce] to bulgur to make *kibbeh-nayeh* [a mixture of bulgur, tomato and pepper molasses, shaped into balls], instead of adding the traditional tomato molasses to the recipe, showing a high level of creative thinking.

In a women's cooperative kitchen, where Syrian and Turkish women cook together, we witnessed another example of creative leftover usage. One Turkish participant said whenever they make Turkish cookies (*kurabiye)* which require egg yolks as a central ingredient, Syrian women use the egg whites to make *Toum* [a savory garlic sauce] that they would take back to their homes. Amal confirmed this, explaining:

> Here in the cooperative kitchen, we always have extra egg whites, because when we make *kurabiye*, we make it with egg yolks, and Turkish cooks throw away the egg whites. So, we make garlic sauce with it for all of us to eat.

These examples of reusing kitchen materials and creative leftover usage demonstrate the resourcefulness of Syrian refugee women confronting the economic precarity of urban

Figure 6. Spices stored in plastic milk and juice containers (photograph by Nour Zanjer).

life and in this sense, these creative practices can be seen also as a form of adaptation. Just like refugee art that can be considered "transgressive cosmopolitanism," food can also be a source of creative self-expression (Rygiel and Baban 2019). Recycling is not just about creating food security by saving money and acting sustainably, it is also an expression of innovative resilience in the cultural context of Syrian women.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how Syrian women in Turkey use "culinary sustainability" as part of resilience strategies in the face of food precarity and a new urban context. By "homemade food practices," "adjustment" and "recycling," they resist, adapt and innovate to provide a food-secure environment for their families. These strategies cannot be understood outside of the cultural context of women as familial caretakers and mothers responsible for children's health and happiness. As forced migrants, maintaining cultural foods is about more than nice memories – it is a practice of cultural survival. Yet, in order for these culinary traditions to survive, women must not only know their culture, but also negotiate a variety of intersectional positions as financially insecure migrants. Our research shows that the urban context of Istanbul creates challenges for cultural food preparation as there is

limited access to traditional ingredients and high costs to obtain them when they are found. Urban life also means exposure to new opportunities for consumption via ready-made foods and fast-food restaurants. Women must juggle the satisfaction and health of children with a limited budget and a need to transmit their food practices. Through a close look at everyday food practices in homes that might be overlooked, such as "making restaurant food," substituting chicken and using a bread bag when rolling out dough, women show us their creativity. Food becomes an artistic, resilient act for them.

Our work addresses the divide in research on sustainability and resilience by taking the experience of Syrian women's food practices as a case study. Our interlocutors are engaged in sustainable food practices that are conditioned by cultural norms and imperatives and embedded in a local context characterized by urban precarity and cultural dislocation. Sustaining cultural food requires adaptive and innovative resilience. Thus, resilience is not opposed to sustainability, nor is it simply a component of sustainability. Rather, resilience and sustainability are both intertwined within the complex cultural context and food insecurity that refugees navigate. Becoming food secure requires making food that is culturally as well as nutritionally sustaining. Whether and how culture remains important for Syrian women in the future is a question that additional research should address. These first-generation migrants have only been in Turkey for 12 years (at most) and future generations may feel differently. Younger women may not want to undertake the work required for *Mouneh* or the preparation of home-made foods. Children exposed to fast food restaurants or Turkish food may not adopt the perspective of their parents who find them unhealthy and not tasty. On the other hand, younger generations might stick to these sustainability practices more as part of cultural survival. Studies focusing on future generations might reveal new aspects of this topic.

In this research, we sought to capture how Istanbul – a mega-city – creates a challenging urban precarity that is all the more important to investigate as refugees are shifted from camps to cities (Agier 2011). In the future, it would be valuable to compare Istanbul to other cities (as indeed we have planned in Turkey). Our research does not address the broader concept of sustainability and environmentalism in Syrian society or in Syrian public life in Turkey (like in Syrian restaurants and markets). We also do not explore the sustainable practices of Syrian men. While we only looked at the sustainable practices of women, food practices of men could reveal new discussions on the reconfiguration of gender relations around food.

Notes

1. Syrians in Turkey are not recognized as legal refugees by the Turkish state despite the fact that Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention. However, given their status as forced migrants who cannot return to their country due to war, we choose to refer to them as refugees in this paper.
2. Sadly, the situation is still dire in Syria. A World Food Program (2022) report states that "12.4 million people are suffering from food insecurity in Syria, including 1.3 million people who suffer from severe food insecurity, nearly 60% of the total population." https://ataarelief.org/en/world-food-day/

3. Food precarity refers to inadequate "nutrition of poor, precarious, vulnerable or otherwise disadvantaged people" (UNESCO Chair in Word Food Systems, Policy Brief 10) https://www.chaireunesco-adm.com/10-Appraising-local-food-precarity.
4. These figures include 2016–2024 and are provided by the Directorate General of Migration Management of Turkey: https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638.
5. These figures are provided by the Directorate General of Migration Management of Turkey: https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638.
6. https://marifetmutfagi.com.tr/.

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