

**Fertility and family dynamics
among refugee women and men from Eritrea and Syria in Germany**

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Abstract

This study investigates family dynamics among forced migrants from Eritrea and Syria to Germany. We analyse the partnership and childbearing patterns of women and men. We pursue the following research questions: 1) What are the union formation and fertility behaviours of refugees in the years before and after migration? 2) How are family events and forced migration trajectories interrelated? 3) Which demographic, socio-economic and migration-related factors are associated with diverse family dynamics of refugees? Our empirical analyses draw on data derived from the quantitative survey "Forced Migration and Transnational Family Arrangements - Eritrean and Syrian Refugees in Germany" (TransFAR) collected in 2020. This survey covers 1,450 respondents and is Germany-wide representative of recent refugees from two major countries of origin of forced migration to Germany. Our analytical strategy is threefold: First, we describe the patterns and prevalence of marriage and childbearing at time of arrival to Germany as well as at time of the survey. Second, sequence analysis techniques are performed, accounting for marriage and fertility trajectories from 5 years before arrival to Germany to 5 years after arrival. Third, the associations between marriage-fertility trajectories and individual demographic, socio-economic and migration-specific factors as well as contextual characteristics are estimated. First preliminary results show that an important share of married individuals experiences a birth in the first years upon arrival in Germany, indicating that the partnership status at arrival is crucial for fertility outcomes at destination. Furthermore, we find considerable differences between genders.

1. Introduction and research questions

The number of forcibly displaced people worldwide reached its so far peak in 2022 with approx. 108.4 million persons, of whom 45.9 million are either international refugees, asylum seekers or other people in need of international protection (UNHCR 2023). The great majority flees to neighbouring countries. Nonetheless, numbers of people arriving in further away high-income countries elsewhere have been rising. With about 2.1 million refugees and asylum seekers in 2022, Germany hosts the fourth largest number worldwide and is the major destination country in Europe. Despite these high and rising numbers, systematic and quantitative studies on refugee populations in European destination countries are scarce, even more so when it comes to their family arrangements, family reunification processes, and family dynamics, including partnership and fertility (Kraus et al. 2019, Saarela & Wilson 2022).

Our study investigates family dynamics among forced migrants from Eritrea and Syria to Germany and adds to the literature in several ways. First, the majority of studies examining refugees and their family structures focus on the life satisfaction of refugees in Germany (Gambaro et al. 2018), on the labour market and educational integration into the host society (Bähr et al. 2019; Brücker et al. 2019) or on transnational activities with family members in origin or transit countries (Bakker et al. 2014). Further research deals with ICT communications and channels of contact of recently arrived refugees in Germany (Baldassar 2016). Finally, the mental well-being, post-traumatic stress and psychological problems of refugees have been studied extensively (Schouler-Ocak/ Kurmeyer 2017). Second, the paper contributes to the literature on migrant fertility by adding refugees. The majority of previous demographic studies focuses on voluntary migrants, i.e., mainly work migrants and their descendants living in Europe. Moreover, we account for fertility behaviour during periods of transit stays, i.e. time spent in other countries after leaving the country of origin and before arriving to Germany. Specifically for the here studied group, 'migration' can be seen as a process that may take years, rather than an event. Third, our paper includes both women and men into the analyses and looks at fertility and partnership trajectories simultaneously.

Our theoretical framework rests on the life-course approach. It builds on several hypotheses that explain the link and interrelatedness between migration (and partnership) and fertility events and trajectories: disruption, interrelation of events, socialization, and adaptation. These hypotheses can be divided broadly into those explaining the direct effect that migration has on fertility trajectories in terms of timing and their interrelatedness in the short run (disruption, interrelation of events), and those comparing fertility differentials and similarities between migrants and the native population at destination in the mid and long run (adaptation, socialization) (Milewski 2010; Kulu & González-Ferrer 2014; Kraus 2017; Kulu et al. 2019). These approaches have been applied to diverse geographical settings and various countries of origin and of destination. Yet, they have been mainly used to explain the behaviour of economically motivated migration or marriage migrants. So far, it remains unclear if and to what extent these hypotheses are applicable to the study of forced migrants' fertility behaviour and other family dynamics.

This study brings the literature on refugees in European destination countries into conversation with the literature on migrant fertility by addressing the following three research questions: 1) What are the union formation and fertility behaviours of refugees in the years before and after migration? 2) How are family events and forced migration trajectories? 3) Which demographic, socio-economic, and migration-related factors are associated with diverse family dynamics of refugees?

2. Data and methods

Our empirical analyses draw on data derived from the quantitative survey "Forced Migration and Transnational Family Arrangements - Eritrean and Syrian Refugees in Germany" (TransFAR¹) collected in 2020. The project was a collaboration between the German Federal Institute for Population Research (BIB) and German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). This survey with approximately 1,450 completed interviews (half Eritrean/half Syrian, half women/half men) is Germany-wide representative of recent refugees from two major countries of origin of forced migration to Germany. The TransFAR data are one of the few datasets that provide reliable and representative data on migrants from Eritrea and Syria residing in Germany. It allows empirical research into the diverse patterns of family arrangements and partnership and fertility trajectories in a comparative perspective.

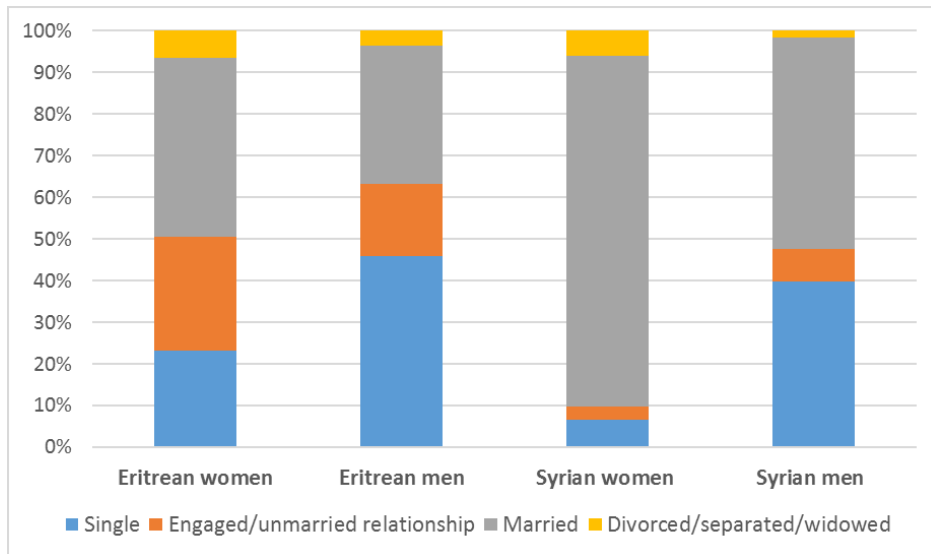
Our analytical strategy is threefold: First, we describe the patterns and prevalence of marital status and childbearing at time of arrival to Germany as well as at time of the survey. Second, sequence analysis techniques are performed, accounting for marriage and fertility trajectories from five years before arrival to Germany to five years after arrival. Hereby, we make use of monthly data and account for periods of transit stays, i.e. time spent in countries after leaving the country of origin and before arriving to Germany. Third, the associations between marriage-fertility trajectories and individual demographic, socio-economic, and migration-specific factors as well as contextual characteristics are estimated. All analyses are performed separately by sex and country of origin of the respondent.

3. Preliminary results

Below, a set of initial preliminary descriptive findings are presented. By taking a closer look at the marital status of the respondents at time of survey, important differences between men and women from both countries of origin appear (Figure 1). The share of married is larger among women, this difference being much more pronounced among Syrians than among Eritreans: About 84% of women and 51% of men from Syria are married (Eritrea: 43% women, 33% men). When focussing on married persons only and taking into consideration their and their (future) spouse's date of arrival, the migration order of respondents and their partners can be derived (Figure 2). Although the pattern is similar for Eritreans and Syrians, the prevalence is different: Overall, most spouses arrive together in Germany or the husband arrives first and the wife joins him rather shortly. Female first-movers are relatively rare among both origin groups. Married men, who several years after their arrival to Germany are still geographically separated from their wives, are virtually non-existent among Syrians, but are, in contrast, relatively common among Eritreans. More than one third of these couples got married in the year the man arrived to Germany or in the years after. Transnational marriages among migrants from African origin countries residing in Europe have been found also for other African-European migration flows (Beauchemin et al. 2015). Figure 3 shows the distribution of children born prior to arrival, as well as births in Germany upon arrival. While only about half of the married Eritrean men and women have at least one child at arrival, the majority of Syrians has one or several children. Furthermore, Syrian men and women as well as Eritrean women experience at least one birth after arrival. Only among Eritrean men the share of having a(nother) child is rather small compared to the other three groups, which is likely the result of being separated from their wives. Finally, sequence analysis is performed (Figure 4). The partnership-fertility trajectories in the years prior to and after arrival to Germany illustrate important differences by gender.

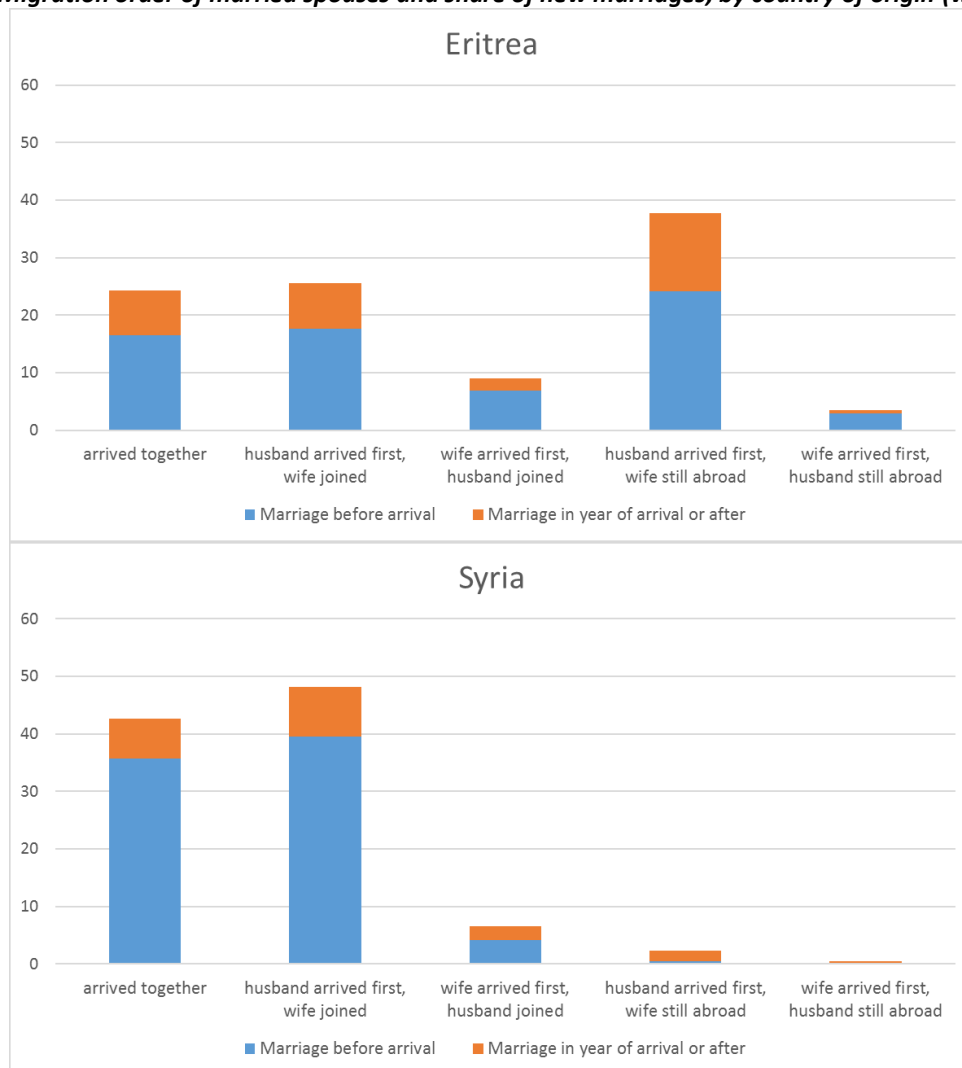
¹ For more information, check out the project website: <https://www.bib.bund.de/transfar>

Figure 1: Marital status of respondents at time of survey, by sex and country of origin (weighted %)



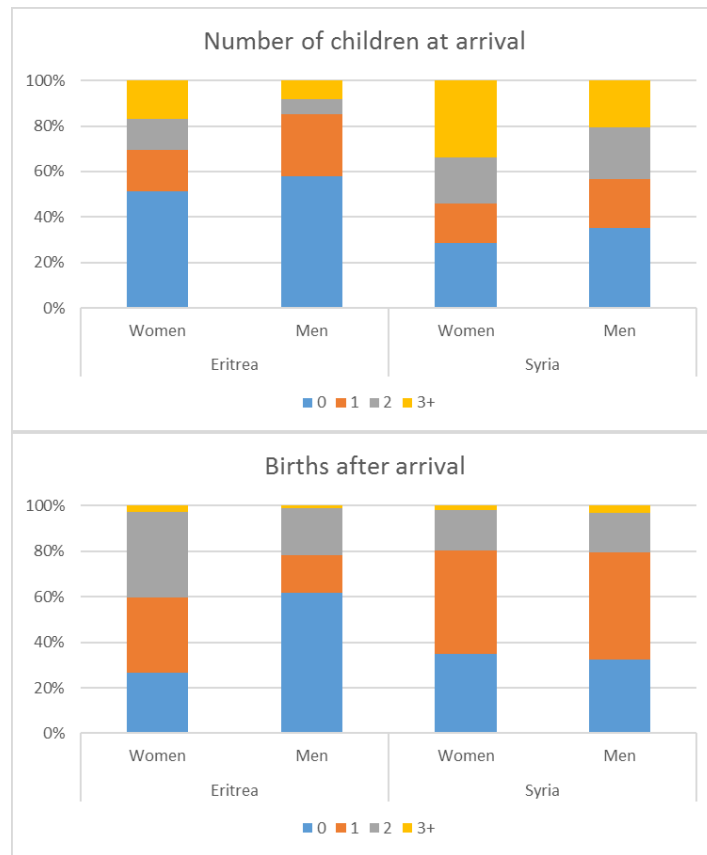
Data: TransFAR (2020)

Figure 2: Migration order of married spouses and share of new marriages, by country of origin (weighted %)



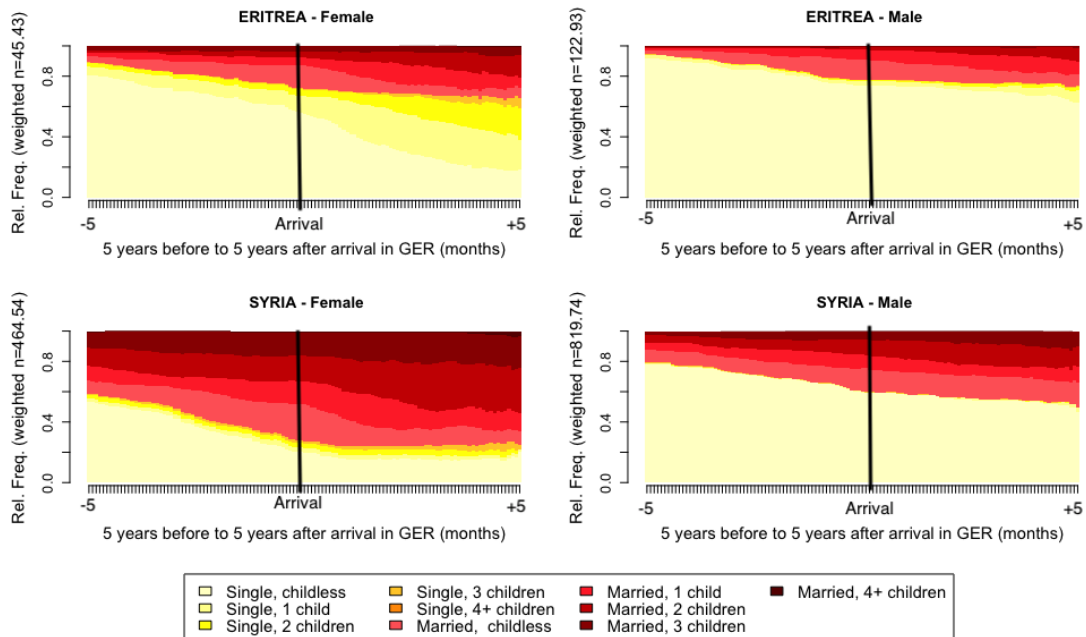
Data: TransFAR (2020)

Figure 3: Number of children at arrival and children born after arrival of married respondents, by sex and country of origin (weighted %)



Data: TransFAR (2020)

Figure 4: Sequence analysis: Distribution plot of partnership and fertility trajectories 5 years before to 5 years after arrival in Germany, by sex and country of origin (weighted)



Data: TransFAR (2020)

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