

# Is it a match? The congruence of partnership preferences between Syrian and Afghan refugees and the German population

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines partnership preferences of male refugees from Afghanistan and Syria who arrived in Germany between 2014 and 2016 and female residents of similar age. Using two comparable factorial survey experiments implemented in the first wave of the PARFORM panel and the ninth wave of the CILS4EU-DE panel, we analyse general tendencies in partnership preferences as well as partnership preferences based on education and religion. Our findings reveal a high willingness among recent male refugees to partner with resident women, whereas resident women exhibit significantly lower openness towards romantic relationships with male refugees. Comparing partnership preferences regarding the religion and education of a potential partner between male refugees and female residents who share similar characteristics reveals that homophily largely governs partner preferences on both sides, but deviations from this pattern point to alternative mechanisms, including status maximization and preservation of cultural identity. Overall, our findings indicate that beyond educational aspirations, cultural and religious distinctions can shape the expression of partner preferences, contributing to substantial asymmetry in intergroup partnership dynamics.

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## Introduction

Conflicts and political unrest in numerous Middle Eastern and North African countries have triggered a substantial migration of refugees to Western Europe in the last decade (OECD, 2017). Germany, in particular, received over 1,4 million refugees between 2014 and 2016, predominantly from Muslim-majority countries such as Syria and Afghanistan. The majority of these arrivals consisted of young, single men within prime marriageable age brackets (BAMF, 2018; Sauer & Kraus, 2024). Facing a host-country partner market with a scarcity of co-ethnic individuals and restrictive policies on transnational marriages (Kraus, 2024; Rüdél & Joly, 2024), many of these refugees may consider forming partnerships with members of the host population (Nauck, 2008). The

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extent to which the German resident population is receptive to such partnerships remains a topic of ongoing public and academic discussion (Dancygier et al., 2019; Kogan et al., 2023; Kuhlemann et al., 2025).

Against the background of a general increase in exogamy across race, ethnic and religious lines in Western societies (Potarca & Mills, 2015; Qian & Lichter, 2011; Rosenfeld, 2008) alongside persistent patterns of endogamy among immigrants and their descendants (Carol, 2016; Carol et al., 2014; Dribe & Lundh, 2011; González-Ferrer, 2006; Hannemann et al., 2018; Kalter & Schroedter, 2010; Lucassen & Laarman, 2009) two questions arise. First, to what extent do recent refugees from Syria and Afghanistan seek partners within the resident population in Germany? Second, do female members of the resident population perceive Syrian and Afghan refugees as potential partners? To address these questions, we analyse the partnership preferences of young male refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and similarly aged female residents in Germany, both with and without migration background. Our objective is to examine the extent to which the partnership preferences of male refugees align with those of the female residents. Specifically, we assess whether male refugees with particular characteristics prefer female partners residing in Germany with corresponding characteristics, and whether women with these characteristics exhibit reciprocal preferences for such men. Given the substantial cultural and socio-economic differences between these groups, the study focuses on two key characteristics: religious orientation and education.

Whereas religion plays a central role in the lives of many refugees from Syria and Afghanistan, and Islam remains a defining aspect of their cultural identity (Siegert, 2020), Germany's resident population exhibits more secular tendencies, with a significant proportion identifying as non-religious (Pollack & Pickel, 2007). Additionally, educational disparities exist: while some refugees from Syria and Afghanistan possess tertiary education, many lack formal qualifications or vocational training (Brücker et al., 2020; Guichard, 2020; Spörlein et al., 2020), leading to difficulties in social integration into German society with ever-increasing shares of highly educated women in the resident population (Blossfeld et al., 2015). Consequently, differences in religious affiliation and educational attainment between male refugees and female members of the resident population may reduce the likelihood of forming partnerships between these groups.

At the same time, the resident population in Germany has changed with a growing proportion of minorities, including Muslims, particularly among the younger generation born to immigrant families (BIM & BAMF, 2025). This demographic shift towards larger diversity in younger cohorts (Kalter & Heath, 2018; Liu & Kulu, 2025) may influence patterns of partner selection among both recent Muslim refugees and established Muslim minority groups in Germany. However, this does not necessarily imply that the latter minority groups are open to forming partnerships with newly arrived refugees from Syria or Afghanistan (Kogan et al., 2023).

Cultural and socio-economic characteristics, particularly the above-mentioned differences in religion and education, play a critical role in assortative mating – a tendency to form partnerships with individuals who share similar cultural (e.g. religion) and socio-economic (e.g. education) backgrounds (see review papers by Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz, 2013). Assortative mating based on education and religion has been extensively studied for its impact on social boundaries and societal cohesion (Dribe &

Lundh, 2011; Furtado, 2012; Rosenfeld, 2008). Prior research indicates that higher levels of education reduce ethnic endogamy while increasing educational homogamy (González-Ferrer, 2006; Van Tubergen & Maas, 2007), largely due to shared social environments, similar life aspirations, and the influence of educational institutions in shaping partner preferences (Blossfeld, 2009). Religious homogamy is linked to the role of religion in structuring values relevant to intimate partnerships (Mahoney et al., 2003; McQuillan, 2004) and to cross-group differences in the salience of these values (Röder, 2015; Scheepers et al., 2002), including – among migrants and their descendants – the degree of cultural and religious compatibility with Western European societies and the social acceptability of interfaith unions within minority communities (Buunk & Dijkstra, 2017; Carol & Teney, 2015; Cila & Lalonde, 2014; Lucassen & Laarman, 2009).

One of the key factors influencing openness to exogamy is personal preferences (Kalmijn, 1998). Reflecting the traits individuals find desirable in potential partners, such preferences are shaped by cultural norms, socialization, personal experiences, and – as discussed above – individual characteristics (Schwartz, 2013). While the mechanisms underlying individual partnership preferences are theoretically well established (see next section), research has often struggled to disentangle preferences from other factors, such as opportunity structures (Lundquist et al., 2024). Furthermore, scholars often overlook the two-sided nature of partner preferences, thereby neglecting a fundamental aspect of partner matching in the mating market. Finally, survey-based research is prone to social desirability bias when respondents answer sensitive questions about attitudes and preferences towards ethnic or racial groups (Krumpal, 2013; Krysan, 1998).

The study therefore makes two contributions to the field of partnership formation research. *First*, it isolates preferences as a distinct factor in the partnership formation process and juxtaposes them between two population groups representing potential partners in the mating market. Explicitly focusing on preferences, the study highlights the role of unconstrained choices and individual agency in partnership decisions. By examining the preferences of male refugees vis-à-vis those of the female members of the resident population, the study adopts a two-sided partner market perspective and assesses the extent to which partner preferences align.

*Second*, the study employs factorial survey experiments – a novel methodological tool in partnership formation research – designed to capture preferences independent of other influences and, to the extent possible, to mitigate the impact of social desirability biases. In line with approaching preferences conceptually from a two-sided perspective, the study employs a standardized factorial survey design across two sub-populations, thereby implementing this two-sided perspective methodologically as well. This methodological approach ensures that the preferences of young male refugees and their counterparts in the resident population are assessed within a unified framework.

In the following, we synthesize existing theoretical approaches on the role of preferences in partnership homogamy and outline potential scenarios for the interplay of partnership preferences by education and religion between male refugees and female residents. Confronting these scenarios with empirical data, the study examines whether both groups strategically utilize education and religious orientation in the

partner market. It further assesses how similarities and differences in preferences for these attributes and groups' characteristics are reflected in overall patterns of preference alignment.

### **Theoretical approaches**

Individual preferences play a pivotal role in the process of partnership formation (Kalmijn, 1998; McPherson et al., 2001) and the resulting trends of religious and educational homogamy. In the following, we discuss three relevant mechanisms of mate preferences, namely *matching*, *competition*, and *exchange* (Schwartz, 2013; Thomas, 2020).

The *matching hypothesis* assumes that both sides of the market prefer partners with characteristics similar to their own, a phenomenon known as *homophily*. An underlying idea behind homophily is that individuals strive for positive assortative mating, i.e. they prefer partners who have similar characteristics, such as educational level, race, religion or ethnic background (Becker, 1991; Buss, 1985). Such preference can be explained through a number of mechanisms, including sustainability of a group's distinguishable social and cultural identity (Tajfel, 1981), easiness of communication among partners and common understanding supported by shared experiences, values, and backgrounds (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Kalmijn, 1994), conflict reduction within partnership (McPherson et al., 2001), and related to partnership stability (Schwartz, 2013), emotional well-being or marital harmony (Clarkwest, 2007), and finally the transmission of socioeconomic and cultural resources to the next generation (Kalmijn, 1991).

In contrast to the similarity and complementarity emphasized in the matching hypothesis, dissimilarity and substitutability shape the following two paradigms. In both, individuals with dissimilar characteristics form partnerships if they offer substitute traits and resources that complement each other's deficiencies and maximize overall well-being (Merton, 1941; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008; Schwartz, 2013).

Competition is a key mechanism within the paradigm of *status maximization*. The argument is as follows: since economic well-being is shared among family members, individuals strive to maximize the collective earnings potential of the couple (Kalmijn, 1994, 1998). This drive to enhance economic prospects leads individuals to secure the best possible mate, particularly in the face of competition from others (Bruch & Newman, 2019). Under such conditions, certain individuals are universally preferred and pursued, often those with high incomes or high socioeconomic status (SES) (Edwards, 1969; Kreager et al., 2014). A growing body of research also examines stereotypes associated with men and women from different racial backgrounds, which contribute to gender-asymmetric processes of competition (Feliciano et al., 2009; Lewis, 2016; McClintock, 2010).

The *exchange hypothesis* assumes that partners maximize the utility of a partnership through exchange of resources. Furthermore, scholars contend that partnership preferences might be gendered and hence vary depending on the scenario (Lewis, 2016). According to the theory of new home economics (Becker, 1991), romantic partnerships are formed to accumulate resources that can be used to produce desired commodities. This accumulation of resources can be maximized through the exchange of different types of resources between partners. Within this paradigm, it is not unlikely for high-status men to prefer low-status women, as they aim to secure a traditional division of

labour in the household. Conversely, low-status women are likely to prefer high-status men, aligning with a potentially more traditional role in the household division of labour within marriage. In such partnerships, highly educated men typically secure income in the labour market, while less educated women assume responsibilities for household management and childcare. Research on gender asymmetry in preferences has often referenced the gendered patterns of labour force participation (Gonalons-Pons & Schwartz, 2017).

In ethnically and racially diverse societies, a *different form of status exchange* can occur (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941). Individuals might attempt to balance unequal traits through exchange, trading their higher status in one dimension for a partner with higher status in another dimension (Chappetta & Barth, 2022; Hou & Myles, 2013; Potarca & Bernardi, 2017; for critique see Rosenfeld, 2010). Exchange theory suggests that partnership dynamics often involves a trade-off between different forms of status, particularly in contexts where ethnic or racial inequalities intersect with socioeconomic disparities. Individuals from less privileged minority ethnic groups who have achieved higher levels of education or socioeconomic status may seek partnerships with members of more privileged majority groups, even if the majority group partner has lower educational or socioeconomic standing. In such cases, a partner from the minority group offers their elevated socioeconomic position in exchange for the social prestige or advantages associated with the majority partner's privileged ethnic or racial identity. On the other side of the partnership market, members of the majority group may pursue such relationships to offset disadvantages in their own socioeconomic standing. For them, a partnership with a higher-SES minority partner may provide a pathway to elevate their overall social capital, even if it involves aligning with a partner whose ethnic or migration background is perceived as socially less desirable (Lundquist et al., 2024). This dynamic highlights how exchanges of resources – whether in terms of education, income, or other forms of status – can shape partnership formation in ways that deviate from the typical patterns of homogamy.

### **Expectations**

*The mechanism of matching based on homophily* suggests a preference for individuals who share similar characteristics. Shared religious and educational backgrounds are believed to enhance relationship quality by fostering common cultural interests and values, thereby facilitating a cohesive lifestyle for both partners (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; Kalmijn & Bernasco, 2001). This alignment extends beyond shared interests to include congruence in problem-solving strategies and decision-making processes, which promotes effective communication and minimizes potential conflicts. As a result, religious and educational homophily strengthens emotional bonds, enhances mutual understanding, and establishes a robust foundation for social support within intimate relationships (Kalmijn, 1994; Skopek et al., 2011). Also, from the economic model of marriage, similarity in education within partnerships is optimal when education is viewed as a cultural trait tied to attitudes, values, and lifestyles. Partners with comparable educational levels are more likely to complement each other, creating synergy in their shared goals and outlooks on life (Leesch & Skopek, 2023).

Therefore, in the context of religious affiliation, individuals are expected to prefer partners who practice the same religion rather than those of a different faith (H1a). For example, individuals affiliated with Christianity should favour partners who also identify as Christian. Similarly, individuals with high levels of religiosity are expected to prefer partners who share a comparable degree of religiosity within the same religious affiliation (H1b). In the context of education, this mechanism implies a preference for partners with similar levels of educational attainment (H1c). Specifically, highly educated individuals are expected to prefer highly educated partners over those with lower levels of education, whereas individuals with lower educational attainment are more likely to prefer partnering with similarly educated peers.

*The mechanism of status maximization* pertains to the socio-economic and labour market productivity roles of education. From this perspective, individuals with higher levels of education are generally preferred as partners, regardless of their ethnic background or (refugee) migration status. As the proportion of highly educated individuals in a society increases, the preference for ‘marrying up’ in education extends even to individuals with lower levels of education (Uunk, 2024). According to this perspective, lower-educated refugee men and resident women are expected to prefer highly educated partners (H2a).

Applying the status-maximization paradigm to religious affiliation, however, is more challenging. Unlike education, which is a hierarchical stratification dimension, religion operates as a categorical differentiator. In ethnically stratified societies, religious affiliation can acquire symbolic stratifying characteristics, particularly when specific religious groups experience systemic discrimination or social exclusion (Davidson & Pyle, 2012). Given the unique position of Islam in Western European societies (Foner & Alba, 2008; Voas & Fleischmann, 2012) and the differences between conservative Islamic practices in the Middle East and those in Europe (Simsek et al., 2018; Van Tubergen & Sindradóttir, 2011), it is conceivable that religious Muslim refugees, or refugees practicing other non-Christian religions, may seek to ‘maximize their status’ by forming partnerships across religious boundaries. Accordingly, non-Christian refugees are expected to prefer non-religious, less religious, or even Christian women as potential partners (H2b). Furthermore, the permissibility of interfaith marriages in Islam under certain conditions (Esposito, 2001) may provide a pathway for these refugees to enhance their social standing in Germany. In contrast, comparable scenarios are unlikely to emerge for women from the resident population, who are Christian or non-religious in their vast majority. However, minority religious groups within the German resident population may display preference patterns akin to those outlined above for refugees (H2c), as their members may navigate similar dynamics of status maximization in partner selection.

*The mechanism of exchange* for the refugee group aligns with the theoretical framework outlined by Merton (1941) and Davis (1941). In this context, a highly educated refugee may express interest in forming a partnership with a less educated individual from the resident population with or without a migration background (H3a). Conversely, individuals from the majority group, particularly women, often seek compensation for a partner’s stigmatized refugee status or national origin, typically in the form of higher socioeconomic standing (Lundquist et al., 2024). For women in the resident population, Becker’s (1991) theory of negative assortative mating for substitutable traits is particularly relevant. Low-educated women may maximize the specialization gains of marriage

**Table 1.** Summary of expectations.

Dimensions → Groups → Mechanisms ↓	Religion/religiosity		Education	
	Refugee men	Resident women	Refugee men	Resident women
1. Homophily matching	Concordance of own characteristics and preferences			
	(1a) by religious denomination and (1b) religiosity		(1c) by education	
2. Status maximization	(2b) Non-Christian refugees prefer either Christian or non-religious	(2c) Non-Christian residents prefer either Christian or non-religious	(2a) Lower-educated individuals prefer highly educated	
3. Exchange	Not applicable		(3a) Highly educated male refugees prefer low-educated females from the resident population	(3b) Low-educated females from the resident population prefer highly educated refugees

by pairing their high household productivity with a partner’s high market productivity (Blossfeld, 2009; Schwartz, 2013). Following this logic, low-educated women from the resident population can be expected to express a particular preference for highly educated refugees (H3b).

However, such mechanisms of exchange appear far less applicable to the religious dimension. Unlike education or socioeconomic status, religion lacks a straightforward exchange dynamic, as it functions more as a categorical or symbolic trait than a substitutable or compensatory resource in the partner market.

Our expectations are summarized in Table 1. Some expectations are not uniquely explained by a single mechanism. For instance, the preference of lower-educated resident women for highly educated partners (Hypotheses 2a for both groups and 3b for resident women) can be interpreted through both the status-maximization and exchange paradigms. However, the presence of contrasting expectations for refugee men and resident women under the exchange paradigm, alongside similar expectations under the status-maximization paradigm, should allow for cautious inferences regarding the mechanisms driving our findings.

## Data and methods

### Data

We measure partnership preferences with two almost identical factorial survey experiments (FSE) that were implemented in the ninth wave of the ‘German Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries’ (CILS4EU-DE (Kaltefleiter et al., 2024)) and the first wave of the PARFORM panel (Authors, forthcoming).

The CILS4EU-DE panel is the German follow-up of the CILS4EU panel that started in 2010 as a survey of nationally representative samples of ninth-graders aged 14–15 in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and England, in which children with migration background were oversampled. For wave 1 a sample was drawn using a three-stage sampling design (schools, classes and adolescents). A refreshment sample of the same birth cohorts was drawn in wave 6 with sampling based on registers from randomly selected

municipalities. While the oversampling of respondents of the original sample was reached by oversampling schools with a high proportion of pupils with migration background, for the refreshment sample individuals on the register lists were classified into a possible migration background using name-based procedures (Kalter et al., 2019). In wave 9, which was collected in 2022, respondents were mostly 26–28 years old. The overall participation rate in this wave was 87.1%, resulting in 4,196 men and women participating in three modes (web, postal, and telephone) (Soiné et al., 2024). The FSE was implemented in the postal and web questionnaires resulting in a total of 3,812 cases available for the analysis (for details see: Kogan et al. 2025a).

The PARFORM survey was designed to study *Partnership Formation in the Context of Recent Refugee Migration*, with its first wave being conducted throughout 2022 and 2023 in CAPI and CAWI modes. A sample for PARFORM was drawn from 67 municipalities with a high share of Afghan and Syrian refugees in 14 out of 16 German federal states. Addresses were obtained via municipal registers between 2021 and 2023 and the Central Register of Foreigners (Ausländerzentralregister (AZR), provided by the Research Data Centre of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Forschungsdatenzentrum des Bundesamts für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF)) 2023: Sample from the inventory of the AZR from date 31.07.2023 (BAMF-Forschungsdatenzentrum, 2021)). The sample included young (born 1984–2002), male refugees with Syrian or Afghan citizenship – held either exclusively or in combination with another citizenship, including German – irrespective of their legal status at the time of address collection<sup>1</sup>, who arrived in Germany between 2014 and 2018. The survey sample was furthermore restricted to respondents who were unmarried at the time of arrival in Germany. Overall, the survey data includes 3,412 respondents who consented to participate and passed the screening questions. Of those 1,139 (33.38%) participated in the CAPI and 2,273 (66.62%) in the CAWI mode (Kogan et al. 2025a).

### **The factorial survey experiment**

Factorial survey experiment (FSE) combines features of experiments and surveys. Compared to classic survey questions, FSEs offer the possibility to single out how specific factors influence people's judgments by systematically manipulating the specific factors and randomly assigning the specific factors to respondents of a survey. An additional advantage of FSEs is that they are less susceptible to social desirability bias, as respondents evaluate hypothetical scenarios with simultaneous variation across multiple dimensions rather than expressing direct attitudes toward ethnic or migrant groups. The employed FSEs measure partnership preferences among male refugees and female members of the resident population of comparable age in Germany, thereby enabling a direct comparison between the two groups. Accordingly, both FSEs were designed to be as similar as possible, while accounting for differences between the two populations and the constraints of each survey. In both surveys, respondents were presented with several different short descriptions of hypothetical partners, followed by a question asking whether they would be willing to engage in a certain type of romantic partnership with the described person (so-called vignettes). These descriptions varied in several aspects, namely the origin, the religious affiliation, the religiosity, and the educational

**Example PARFORM**

You have met a German woman. This woman is Christian, but religion does not play a big role in her life. The woman has never attended a university.

In general, can you imagine getting married to the woman described?

**Example CILS4EU-DE**

You have met someone, who came to Germany as a refugee from Syria a few years ago. This person is Muslim, and religion plays an important role in his/her life. The person has a university degree.

In general, can you imagine having a committed romantic partnership with the person described?

11-point answer scale from 1 (not at all) to 11 (completely) in both data sets

**Figure 1.** Example of vignettes (English translation). Note: Dimensions are underlined; English translation, for actual German wording see figure S1.

level of the described partner, as well as the type of partnership (so-called dimensions of a vignette), with different attributes (so-called levels) (see Figure 1 for an example).

While information on the religious affiliation (Christian vs. Muslim), the level of religiosity (important vs. not important) and education (educational degree vs. no educational degree) of the described person is identical in both FSEs, the information on the origin of the potential partner differs between the two surveys (see Table 2 for an overview of the dimensions in both surveys). In the FSE in the CILS4EU-DE survey, the origin of the partner contained the following options: (a) born in Germany to parents with no migration background, (b) born in Germany but having a migration background, (c) a refugee from Syria, or (d) a refugee from Afghanistan. In the FSE in the PARFROM panel, the origin of the partner was described as either (a) German,

**Table 2.** Dimensions and levels of vignettes.

Dimensions	Levels	
	PARFORM	CILS4EU
Type of partnership	1. Marriage 2. Committed romantic partnership 3. Casual romantic partnership	
<i>Characteristics of the described partner</i>		
Origin	1. German	1. Born in Germany, without a migration background
	2. Neither German nor Syrian/Afghan, lives in Germany	2. Born in Germany, with migration background
	3. Syrian/Afghan, lives in Germany	3. Syrian refugee
	4. Syrian/Afghan, lives not in Germany	4. Afghan refugee
Religious affiliation	1. Christian 2. Muslim	
Religiosity	1. Religion does not play a big role in the person's life 2. Religion plays an important role in the person's life	
Education	1. Never has been enrolled in tertiary education 2. Has a tertiary educational degree	

(b) neither German nor from the same country as the respondent and living in Germany (i.e. with migration background other than one's own), (c) from the same country as the respondent and living in Germany, or (d) from the same country as the respondent and not living in Germany. It should be noted that the operationalization of the origin of a partner differs somewhat between refugee men and resident women, which may indicate that respondents draw somewhat different boundaries regarding a hypothetical partner's citizenship, ancestry or migration generational status. Furthermore, while in the CILS4EU-DE survey, the description of this partner was formulated in gender-neutral language ('you have met someone'), the PARFORM vignettes always described the partner as a woman ('you have met a woman') to make it easier to understand for respondents with lower skills of the German language. This difference may have also eased participation among resident women with a homosexual orientation, as the vignette in their case did not presuppose the partner's gender. By contrast, male refugees with homosexual orientation were instructed by the personal interviewer to respond to the vignette as if the hypothetical partner were male in the CAPI version; comparable instructions were not implemented in the CAWI version.<sup>2</sup> After the description of this potential partner, respondents had to evaluate on an 11-point scale, ranging from 'not at all' to 'completely',<sup>3</sup> whether they could imagine entering a romantic partnership with the described person. In both surveys, the closeness of this partnership was varied by the following types: marriage, committed, or casual partnership.

Altogether, the vignette encompassed five dimensions with either two or four levels, resulting in 96 unique vignettes, from which we selected 48 vignettes for both surveys. For this selection, we employed a D-efficient design accounting for all two-level interactions instead of a random selection of the vignettes used in the survey. This design maximizes orthogonality (i.e. minimizes correlations between the dimensions of the vignette) and level balance (i.e. an equal frequency of the levels of the vignettes), and hence allows us to causally interpret the results and ensure that the effects of vignette dimensions can be estimated precisely (Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). In the CILS4EU-survey, these 48 vignettes have then been allocated to 12 experimental groups (4 vignettes per respondent). In the PARFORM survey, the 48 vignettes have been allocated to 8 experimental groups (6 vignettes per respondent). In both surveys, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the experimental groups, and the order of the presented vignettes was shuffled for each respondent.

### **Operationalization of respondents' characteristics**

To account for respondents' origin, we differentiate between male refugees stemming from Afghanistan or Syria based on information from the respective subsample in the PARFORM data and female members of the resident population in Germany. For the latter, we differentiate between respondents with and without a migration background, based on the information on their own country of birth as well as that of their parents and grandparents provided in the CILS4EU-DE survey (for detailed information on the measurement, see Dollmann et al. (2014).<sup>4</sup>

To test whether partnership preferences of male refugees and female members from the resident population align once they share similar characteristics, we use information on the *religious orientation* and the highest *educational degree* of respondents available in

both surveys. To measure religious orientation, we combined information on religious affiliation and the level of religiosity. In both surveys, respondents were asked whether they identify with a specific religious denomination. This information is used to differentiate between respondents who affiliate themselves with Islam, Christianity, or another denomination. An additional category includes individuals who were religiously unaffiliated. Furthermore, respondents were asked to rate the importance of religion in their lives. Although this question was asked in the same way in both surveys, different answer scales were used. While respondents from the CILS4EU-DE survey were presented with a 4-point answer scale in which they could describe the importance of religion as *very important*, *quite important*, *not very important*, or *not important at all*, respondents from the PARFORM survey were presented with a 5-point answer scale in which they could describe the importance of religion as *very important*, *important*, *neither important nor not important*, *not important*, or *not important at all*. This information has been used to differentiate between respondents for which religion is (1) not important and (2) religion is important. Respondents in the PARFORM survey who stated that religion is neither important nor not important were assigned to the category (2) religion is important.<sup>5</sup> In case of missing information on respondents' religious affiliation or importance of religion in the 9th wave of the CILS4EU-DE data set, we imputed the respective information from the 8th wave.

Finally, we constructed a variable on *religious orientation* using both the information on respondents' religious affiliation and the importance of religion. We distinguish between 3 groups. The first group comprises *non-religious* respondents, including respondents who report that religion is not important regardless of their stated religious affiliation, as well as those who indicate no religious affiliation irrespective of how they assess the importance of religion.<sup>6</sup> Second group consists of *religious Christian* respondents, encompassing respondents who both self-identify as Christian and report that religion is important in their lives. Finally, the third group is *religious Muslims*, encompassing respondents who identify as Muslim and indicate that religion plays an important role in their lives. Respondents who do not fall into one of these groups – namely, respondents of other denominations such as Christianity or Islam who state religion to be important – were excluded from the analyses; this accounts for about one percent of respondents in each dataset.

To capture respondents' highest level of education, we differentiate between respondents with and without a tertiary educational degree. For respondents of the CILS4EU-DE survey, we used information from previous waves to construct this variable. For the respondents of the PARFORM survey, we combined information on the highest educational degree attained in their country of origin and information on educational degrees in Germany.

### **Analytical sample and strategy**

For our analyses, we used only information of those respondents that evaluated at least one vignette ( $n = 2880$  in PARFORM) and – for the CILS4EU-survey – included only those respondents that identify themselves as being female ( $n = 2215$  in CILS4EU-DE). Furthermore, we excluded respondents with missing information on religious orientation and highest educational degree (60 respondents in CILS4EU-DE, 183 respondents

in PARFORM). We then constructed two distinct analytical samples that differ with respect to the inclusion of specific vignettes. The first analytical sample (called ‘all vignettes’ in the following) contains 15,896 vignette evaluations by 2,697 male respondents from the PARFORM data and 8,615 vignette evaluations from 2,155 female respondents from the CILS4EU-DE data. The second analytical sample (‘matching vignettes’) contains only the evaluations of vignettes that relate to the respective group of particular interest in this study. For male refugees (PARFORM) these are vignettes that describe the origin of the partner as either being a German woman or a woman that is neither German nor co-national, but lives in Germany. For female members of the resident population (CILS4EU-DE) these are vignettes that describe the partner as being either a Syrian or an Afghan refugee. This data set contains 7,938 vignette evaluations for male respondents and 4,307 vignette evaluations by female respondents.

Table 3 presents the number of cases and the distribution of respondents’ characteristics in both samples, as well as separate figures for Afghan and Syrian refugees in the PARFORM sample and for women with and without a migration background in the CILS4EU-DE sample. This descriptive information underscores substantial differences in religious orientation and highest educational degree between male refugees and female members of the resident population.

The largest share of the male refugees is religious Muslims (75%), followed by a substantial share of respondents that are classified as not religious (21%). The group of religious Christians is quite low (around 4%). This distribution does not differ substantially

**Table 3.** Description of sample.

	PARFORM		CILS4EU-DE					
<b>Number of cases</b>								
Respondents	2,697		2,155					
All vignettes	15,896		8,615					
Matching vignettes	7,938		4,307					
<b>Respondents’ characteristics</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>				
Religious Orientation								
not religious	567	21.0	1,567	72.7				
religious Christian	105	3.9	321	14.9				
religious Muslim	2,025	75.1	267	12.4				
Education								
No university degree	2,215	82.1	1,265	58.7				
university degree	482	17.9	890	41.3				
	<b>Afghan refugees</b>	<b>Syrian refugees</b>	<b>Resident women w/o MB</b>	<b>Resident women with MB</b>				
<b>Number of cases</b>								
Respondents	1,102	1,702	1,125	1,030				
All vignettes	6,430	10,053	4,498	4,117				
Matching vignettes	3,202	5,032	2,248	2,059				
<b>Respondents’ characteristics</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Religious Orientation								
not religious	251	23.8	316	19.2	955	84.9	612	59.4
religious Christian	35	3.3	70	4.3	166	14.8	155	15.1
religious Muslim	767	72.8	1,258	76.5	4	0.4	263	25.5
Education								
no university degree	947	89.9	1,268	77.1	598	53.2	667	64.8
university degree	106	10.1	376	22.9	527	46.8	363	35.2

Notes: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0); CILS4EU-DE wave 9. MB = Migration background.

between Afghan and Syrian refugees, although the share of non-religious respondents is slightly higher, and the share of religious Muslims is slightly lower among Afghan respondents than among Syrian respondents. The majority of women in the resident population can be classified as not religious (73%), followed by smaller and relatively similar shares of religious Christians (15%) and religious Muslims (12%) respondents. Except for religious Christian respondents, these proportions differ considerably between the samples of women with and without a migration background. Among women without a migration background, 85% identify as non-religious, compared to 59% of women with a migration background. With the exception of four cases, all religious Muslim women have a migration background, resulting in a share of 25% within this group.

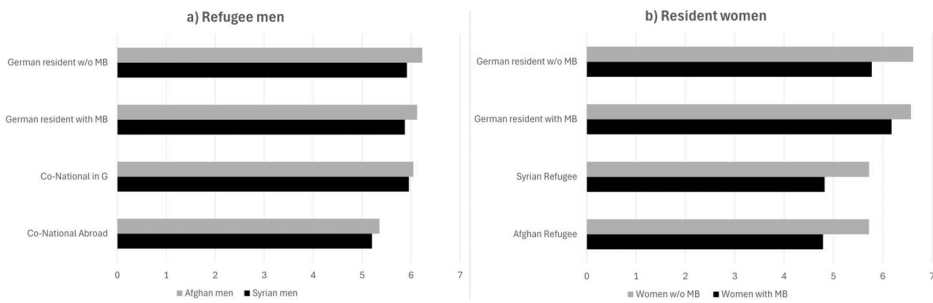
Educational attainment likewise differs markedly between the two samples. Whereas 41% of female respondents hold a university degree, this share is substantially lower in the sample of male respondents (18%). Within the refugee sample, university attainment is more common among Syrian respondents (23%) than among Afghan respondents (10%). Among women in the resident population, the proportion with a university degree is higher among women without a migration background (47%) than among women with a migration background (35%).

In all the following analyses, we employ linear regression analyses. Since each respondent evaluated several vignettes, the observations are not independent. To account for this, we calculated robust standard errors clustered by respondents. Additionally, we control the survey mode (CAPI vs. CAWI in PARFORM; PAPI vs. CAWI in CILS4EU-DE) and the order in which the vignettes were presented. Since the experimental design and the randomization of vignettes reduces the risk of confounding and omitted variable bias, we do not control any respondent's characteristics in our analyses. It is important to note that all subsequent results are based on models that include the full set of vignette dimensions. In presenting the findings, however, we focus only on those vignette dimensions relevant to our theoretical expectations. The results of the full models are reported in the supplementary material.

## Results

### ***Openness towards partnering with male refugees and resident women: a two-sided approach***

In a first step, we use the first sample described above, which includes all vignettes regardless of the potential partner's origin, to illustrate the general openness towards partnering with an outgroup: male refugees from the perspective of resident women and members of the resident female population from the perspective of male refugees in Germany. [Figure 2a](#) shows predicted values based on models estimated for Syrian and Afghan refugees on the openness towards partnering with the described vignette person depending on the origin of this person (see Table S3 for the full model). For both Syrian and Afghan refugees, we observe the lowest preference for co-ethnic partners, who do not live in Germany. Afghan refugees show the highest preference for a German resident partner without a migration background, followed by a German resident partner with a migration background and an Afghan partner living in Germany. The differences



**Figure 2.** Openness towards a potential partner by origin of the partner. Notes: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0); CILS4EU-DE wave 9. N(men) = 15,896 vignette evaluations by 2,697 respondents; N(women) = 8,615 vignette evaluations by 2,155 respondents; predicted probabilities. The estimates are reported in Table S3. MB = Migration background.

between these three groups are, however, only small and statistically not significant. Similarly, Syrian refugees show the highest preferences for partners living in Germany, independent of whether this is a German partner with or without a migration background or a Syrian partner living in Germany. Overall, Afghan refugees react in all vignettes more positively than Syrian refugees ( $\beta = 0.31$ ,  $p$ -value = 0.027), but we find no statistically significant differences in the reaction towards the origin of a potential partner between Afghan and Syrian refugees. Overall, these results show a general high openness among male refugees towards partnering with a woman from the resident German population, although the place of residence of a potential co-national partner (in Germany vs. abroad) seems to be the most decisive characteristic.

In contrast, comparable analyses for the resident female population show a much lower openness towards partnering with an Afghan or Syrian refugee (see figure 2b). Both women with and without a migration background clearly prefer a partner born in Germany over a Syrian or Afghan refugee. Women with a migration background are statistically significantly more open to a partner with a migration background compared to women without a migration background. By contrast, differences in preferences towards non-refugees among women without a migration background are small and not statistically significant. However, both groups exhibit a considerably lower level of openness towards a partnership with a refugee, regardless of whether this refugee originates from Syria or Afghanistan. Overall, women with a migration background provide more negative responses in all vignettes ( $\beta = -0.84$ ,  $p$ -value = 0.000) compared to women without a migration background.

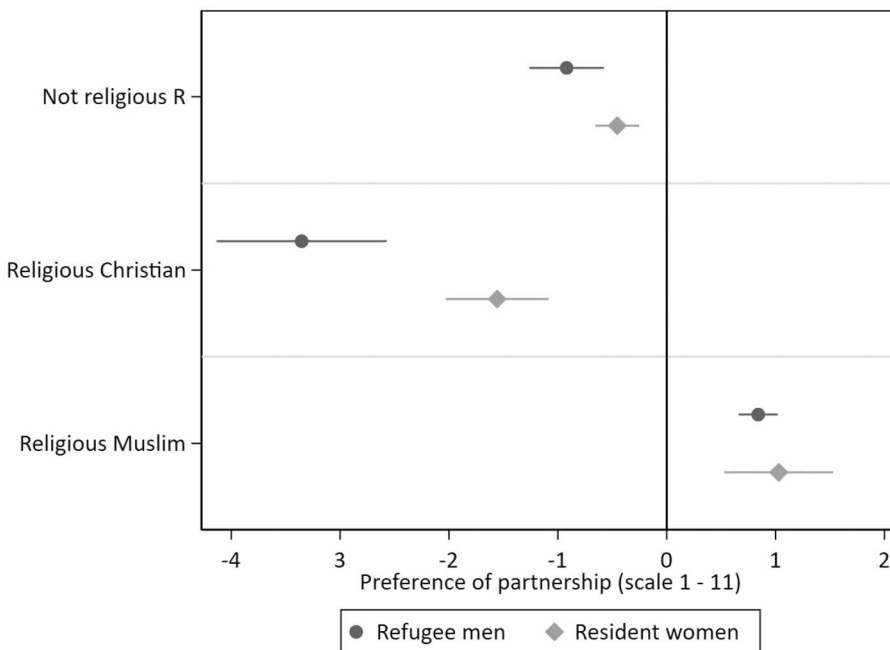
Taken together, we observe a high level of openness among male Afghan and Syrian refugees towards partnering with members of the female resident population. By contrast, openness among resident women of a similar age towards partnering with a refugee is comparatively low. In light of the pronounced socio-economic and cultural differences between the two populations described above, these findings are not that surprising. We therefore turn next to a more detailed examination of whether the preferences for specific characteristics of a potential partner vary by the characteristics of the male and female respondents

**Partnership preferences by religion and education: empirical testing of the theoretically derived expectations**

To examine whether the partnership preferences of the female resident population and male refugees align when they share similar characteristics, we estimated several models that take respondents' characteristics into account. For these models, we rely on our second subsample (matching vignettes). Given the high correlation of specific respondent characteristics among Afghan and Syrian refugees, as well as women with and without a migration background, we combined these groups for greater parsimony in the following analyses.

In the first step, we focus on the role of the religious affiliation of a potential partner. Figure 3 depicts preferences for a Muslim versus a Christian partner by respondents' own religious orientation among refugee men and resident women.

Overall, our results show a higher preference for a partner of the aligning religious affiliation among religious Christian and Muslim respondents and a higher preference for a Christian than a Muslim partner among respondents who are not religious. However, the disapproval of a Muslim partner is lower among the group of non-religious respondents than among religious Christian respondents. The effect sizes are slightly stronger for non-religious men than women, and similar among religious Muslim men and women. However, religious Christian male refugees exhibit a particularly strong disapproval of a Muslim partner.

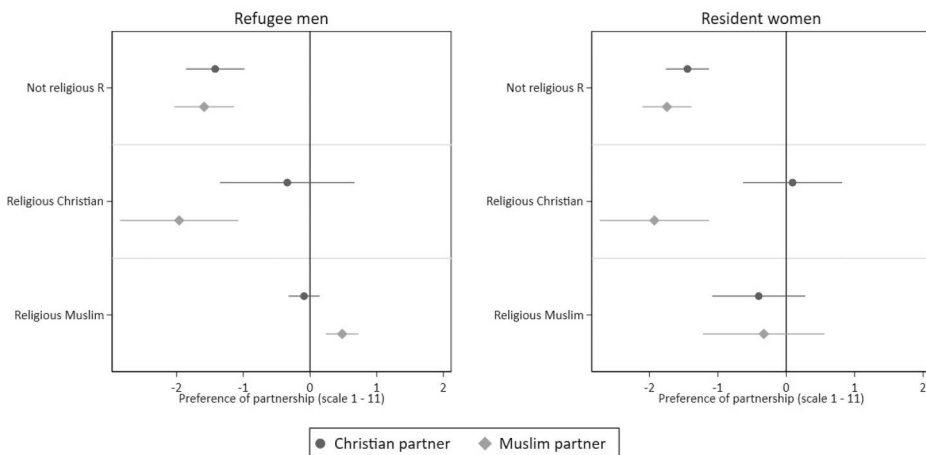


**Figure 3.** Preferences for a Muslim (vs. Christian) partner by respondents' religious orientation. Notes: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0); CILS4EU-DE wave 9. N(men) = 7,938 vignette evaluations by 2,697 respondents; N(women) = 4,307 vignette evaluations by 2,155 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 per cent confidence intervals. R = Respondent. The estimates are reported in Table S4.

These results are largely in line with a matching scenario based on the homophily principle. Irrespective of the analysed group, Muslim respondents prefer Muslim partners, whereas Christian respondents prefer Christian partners. Non-religious respondents depart from this pattern, showing a slight preference for Christian over Muslim partners. Additional analyses show that this pattern is most pronounced among refugee men without religious affiliation (see Table S5). According to the homophily matching mechanism, individuals who do not affiliate with any religion and for whom religion is not important should exhibit the strongest preference for partnering with someone who is likewise non-religious. However, because this option was not available in our vignettes, the following analysis provides a more suitable test of partnership preferences among the group of non-religious respondents.

In the next step, we therefore analyse the openness towards a partner for whom religion is important. As the religiosity of a partner should – as discussed above – depend also on the religious affiliation of this partner, we combined the information of partners' religious affiliation and religiosity for this analysis. Figure 4 displays preferences for a religious compared to a non-religious partner by partners' affiliation for respondents that are either not religious, religious Christians, or religious Muslims.

For both male refugees and female members of the resident population, who are not religious, we find a clear preference for a non-religious partner, independent of whether this partner is Muslim or Christian. Male and female religious Christian respondents show a strong disapproval of a religious partner if this partner belongs to Islam, delivering support for Hypothesis 1a. In the case that the potential partner belongs to Christianity, the religiosity has no influence on the evaluation of this partner. Among the group of religious Muslim respondents, we find notable differences between female members of the resident population and male refugees. While religious Muslim refugees prefer a partner for whom religion is important if this partner is Muslim (support of Hypothesis

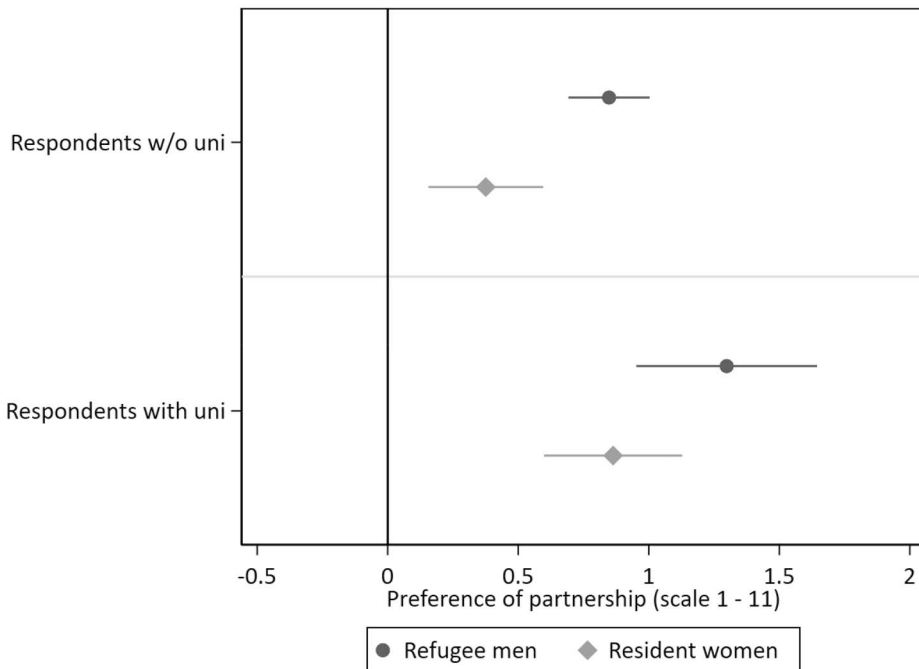


**Figure 4.** Preferences for a religious (vs. not religious) partner by partner's denomination and respondents' religious orientation. Notes: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0); CILS4EU-DE wave 9. N(men) = 7,938 vignette evaluations by 2,697 respondents; N(women) = 4,307 vignette evaluations by 2,155 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 per cent confidence intervals. R = Respondent. The estimates are reported in Table S6.

1b), the religiosity of a Christian partner has no effect on the evaluation of this partner. In contrast with Hypothesis 1b, partners' religiosity has no effect on the evaluation of a potential partner for religious Muslim women, regardless of whether this partner is Muslim or Christian.

Overall, our results regarding the religiosity of a potential partner are only partially in line with the matching mechanism. We found matching preference patterns for non-religious male and female respondents, who disapprove of having a religious partner, and for religious Muslim men who prefer religious over non-religious partners if this partner is Muslim. However, we do not observe matching preferences for religious Christian men and women, who do not approve of a religious partner even if this partner belongs to Christianity. Similarly, religious Muslim women do not prefer religious Muslim partners.

Finally, we turn to the role of a potential partner's level of education, conditional on respondents' own level of education. Figure 5 presents preferences for a partner with a university degree compared to a partner without a university degree among female members of the resident population and male refugees, separately for respondents with and without a university degree. The results demonstrate that all respondents prefer a partner with a university degree over a partner without a university degree independent of their own education, but this effect is stronger among male and female respondents with a university degree.



**Figure 5.** Preferences for a partner with a university degree (vs. without university degree) and highly educated partner by respondents' education. Notes: PARFORM wave 1 (pre-publication version v2.0); CILS4EU-DE wave 9; N(men) = 7,938 vignette evaluations by 2,697 respondents; N(women) = 4,307 vignette evaluations by 2,155 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 per cent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in Table S7.

Additional analyses (Table S8) taking interaction effects between gender and highest educational degree of respondents into account show that the preference for a partner with a university degree is in general higher among men than among women, but this difference is much stronger and statistically significant only between men and women without a university degree.

These results are in line with the matching mechanism among the highly educated respondents for both male refugees and female members of the resident population, delivering support for Hypothesis 1c. The preference for university-educated partners among respondents with lower education points to the status maximization mechanism, according to which lower-status individuals favour partners with a higher status, thus providing support for Hypothesis 2a. Among resident women, this pattern may also reflect an exchange mechanism, whereby less educated women seek partnerships with more highly educated individuals, consistent with Hypothesis 3b.

## Conclusions

Against the backdrop of the high inflow of refugees to European countries, as well as Middle Eastern neighboring countries between 2014 and 2016, migration and demographic research has made significant progress in understanding refugees' demographic patterns and transitions, particularly with regard to partnership norms and the timing of marriage (Bozdag et al., 2022; Sieverding et al., 2020), partnership types, particularly regarding partners' place of residence (Kraus, 2024; Sauer & Kraus, 2024), the role of third parties (Kogan et al., 2025b), and opportunity structures for meeting potential partners (Glorius et al., 2020; Rüdél & Joly, 2024; Sauer et al., 2025). However, the unique role of individual preferences in shaping partnership patterns has largely been overlooked, both for refugee populations and more generally, despite being recognized as a key determinant of partnership formation (Kalmijn, 1998). The present study addresses this gap by examining the partnership preferences of male refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and comparing them with the partnership preferences of similarly aged women in the resident population of Germany.

Building on previous research and the theoretical frameworks of matching by homophily, competition, and status exchange, we formulated several expectations for both groups and the characteristics of a potential partner. Using two almost identical factorial survey experiments implemented in the first wave of the PARFORM panel and the ninth wave of the CILS4EU-DE panel, we first assessed the general openness of male refugees to partner with female members of the resident population and, conversely, the general openness of resident women to partner with male refugees. In a second step, we compared partnership preferences with respect to a potential partner's religion and educational attainment between refugee men and resident women who share similar characteristics.

Overall, our results indicate a high level of openness among male refugees towards partnering with female members of the resident population, but a comparatively low level of openness among the latter towards partnering with recently arrived male refugees. This implies a substantial incongruence in partnership preferences among the two groups. Given the stark difference in individual characteristics among male refugees and resident women, this is not surprising. A closer examination of these potential

partners' characteristics reveals pronounced homophily patterns as well as several noteworthy deviations from the homophily matching mechanism.

In the realm of religion, we found a general disapproval of a religious partner – regardless of their specific religious affiliation – among non-religious male refugees and non-religious women in the resident population. Interestingly, in the absence of a religiously unaffiliated partner option, individuals without religious affiliation tended to prefer a Christian over a Muslim partner. Both, male and female religious Christians showed an approval of a Christian partner, which is particularly strong if this partner is religious. Religious Muslim men and women displayed a stronger preference for a Muslim over a Christian partner, but they differed in how they evaluated the importance of this partner's religiosity. While all these findings are in line with matching based on homophily, the following result aligns rather with a different mechanism. Our findings show that while religious Muslim refugees show a preference for a religious partner of the aligning affiliation, this is not the case among religious Muslim female members of the resident population. The lack of preference for religious Muslim refugees among female Muslims in Germany could align with the status maximization scenario. At the same time, this could also be a sign that religious Muslim women from the resident population in Germany differentiate between Germany-based or their ethnic group-specific Islam and the one brought in by refugees from Syria and Afghanistan. This pattern might reflect a broader cultural distinction, where established Muslim communities perceive newly arrived religious practices as unfamiliar or even incompatible with their own interpretations of Islam. Additionally, it could indicate a social boundary meant to maintain a sense of stability and continuity within their own communities, resisting external influences that might challenge their established norms and values.

Regarding the educational level of a potential partner, we found that all respondents prefer highly educated partners over those with lower levels of education, but there are remarkable differences between both populations in the relative importance of this characteristic. While the findings on female members of the resident population are in line with the matching by homophily perspective, the relatively strong preference for highly educated partners among low-educated refugees could be interpreted in line with status maximization. This suggests that, for refugees, securing a highly educated partner might serve as a means of upward social mobility and integration into higher-status networks in the host society. Additionally, the preference for partners with greater educational attainment supports the idea that individuals, particularly those in more precarious social positions, might seek to enhance their own opportunities and future prospects through strategic partner selection. Furthermore, it is possible that highly educated women, due to their greater exposure to diverse social environments and potentially less discriminatory attitudes, are perceived as more open to intergroup partnerships, making them a more attractive choice for refugees seeking acceptance and social integration. Our results reconfirm that when it comes to 'consensually ranked traits' (McClintock, 2014, p. 577), such as education, individuals may prefer partners who surpass them rather than those who are merely equal, reinforcing the broader dynamics of social mobility and status negotiation in partner choice.

Taken together, our results show that partnership preferences between male refugees in Germany and female members of the resident population only partially align. Even at the level of stated preferences, there is a significant mismatch between the two groups. The strong openness of male refugees toward women from the resident population – beyond

what matching based on homophily would predict – appears to be driven in large part by their absolute preference for highly educated partners. On the other hand, the reluctance of resident women to accept partnerships with refugees is largely explained by their rejection of the ‘imported’ religious Islam. It is possible that resident women perceive the religious practices of newly arrived refugees as different from their own, reinforcing a social distance that limits intergroup partnerships. Moreover, this reluctance might not only reflect religious differences but also concerns about gender norms or perceived lifestyle incompatibilities.

While this research provides valuable insights into the two-sided process of expressing partnership preferences, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study. Despite the effort to design both FSEs as similar as possible, the operationalization of the hypothetical partner’s origin is not fully identical across the two survey contexts, which may evoke slightly different reference frames and social boundaries for the respondents. Furthermore, differences in the use of the vignette person’s gender between the two FSEs may bias responses among non-heterosexual participants and may lead to some variation in response behavior across the surveys; however, such biases are not expected to be substantial. Finally, it is important to note that we cannot directly test the underlying mechanisms driving partner preferences. Instead, we rely on theoretical frameworks to derive hypotheses that describe patterns potentially covered through several mechanisms. This means that our interpretations should be seen as indicative rather than definitive, highlighting the need for further research to test the underlying mechanisms driving partner preferences.

## Compliance with ethical standards

The participants in the PARFORM study and the CILS4EU-DE study gave informed consent before taking part in the survey.

## Notes

1. At the time of the survey around 20% of refugees in our analytical sample report to have already the German citizenship, 28% to have a permanent and 52% to have a non-permanent residence permit.
2. Based on expert consultation and a qualitative pretest of the questionnaire, we refrained from formulating the PARFORM questionnaire in gender-neutral language to avoid non-response to our survey from respondents with traditional attitudes.
3. In the CILS4EU-DE survey the answer scale had 11-points in the CAWI and 10-points the PAPI mode. For the analyses, we combined the evaluation of the two scales using linear stretching, which resulted in a 11-point scale.
4. Among the female respondents in our analytical sample, 16% belong to the first migrant generation, 62% to the second generation, and 22% to the third generation.
5. In sensitivity analyses, we tested whether our results are robust, if they are assigned to the category (1) religion is not important. These analyses (see models Men S1 in Table S4 & S6 in the online supplementary material) do not change any of our substantial findings reported below.
6. Only two percent of female respondents that do not affiliate themselves with any religion state religion to be important. Among male respondents, 3% without religious affiliation state religion to be important and 16% state religion to be neither important nor not important (see Table S1 and Table S2).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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